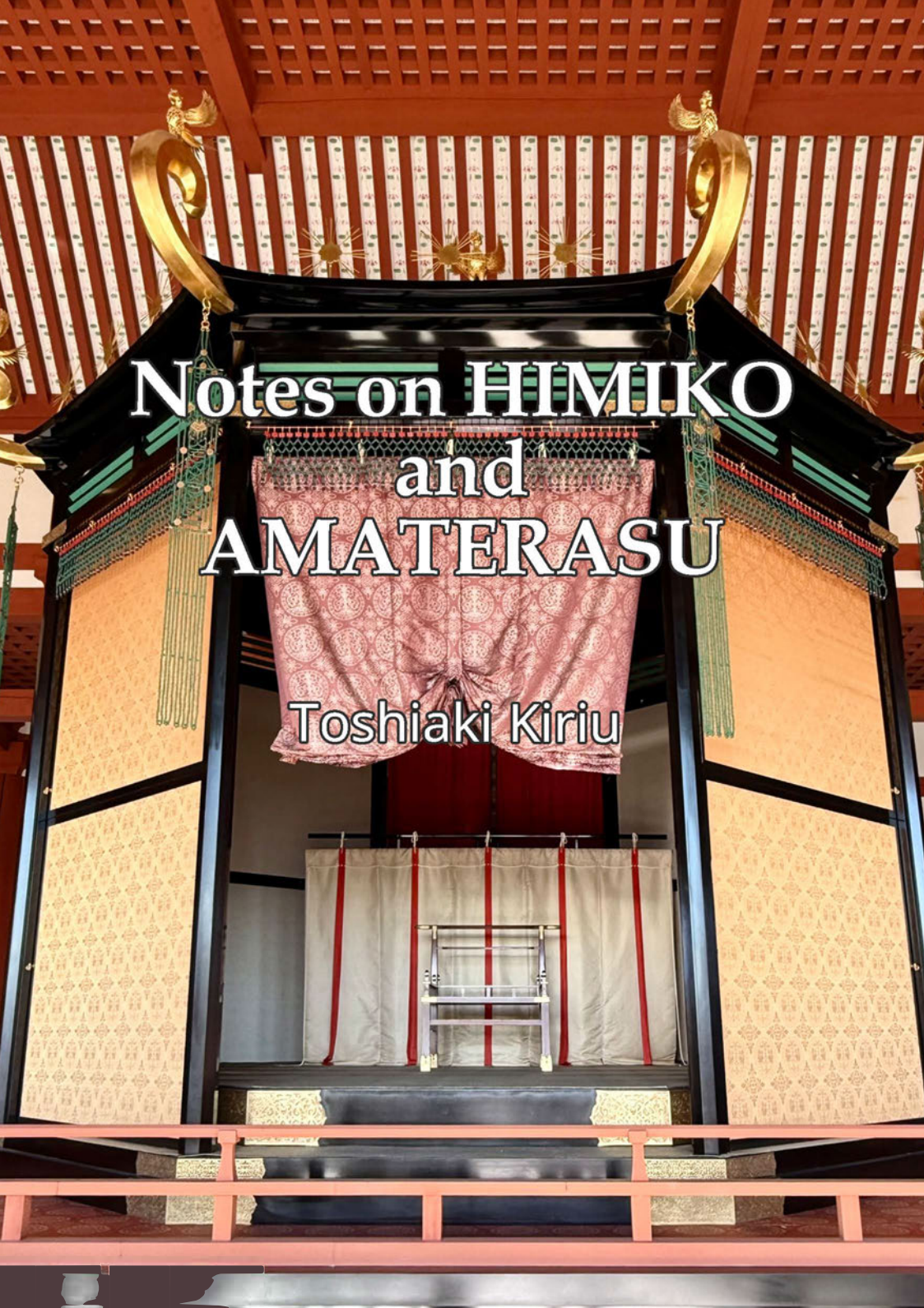
Notes on HIMIKO
and
AMATERASU
Toshiaki Kiriu

Heijo Palace: Changing of the Guard Ceremony

Notes on HIMIKO and AMATERASU

Notes on HIMIKO and AMATERASU

Written by Toshiaki Kiriu

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The reprinted edition was published by Editing Studio DEP in 2026

Publisher : Editing Studio DEP

4-14-7 Umami-kita Koryo Kitakatsuragi Nara 635-0831 Japan

English edition translated by ChatGPT.

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Four years before retiring, in 2006, Mr. Kiriu helped establish the Pure Heart Grand Prize contest (sponsored by The Japan Wool Textile Co., Ltd.) with Hirotada Ototake serving as chief judge. Between 2007 and 2009, the first three years of the contest, Mr. Kiriu participated as a judge alongside Hirotada Ototake. Mr. Kiriu currently enjoys his life after retirement, helping his coworkers at UTA Book conduct operations with particular focus on publishing books on mental activities and the importance of such activities.

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Books authored by Mr. Kiriu include the following:

"Anata no shiranai Nara no Katsuragisan" (Undiscovered Aspects of Katsuragi — A Guidebook to Katsuragi);
"Boku no naze, watashi no naze—watashitachi wa naze umaretekitano" (My Mystery and Your Mystery—Why We Were Born);
"Kojitachi no runesansu — Tomasu no monogatari" (A Renaissance of Orphans — The Tale of Thomas);
"Toki wo koete tsutaetai koto" (A Story I Want to Pass on for Generations)
"Suetsugu Masanao to Murayama Touan" (Masanao Suetsugu and Touan Murayama [Winner of a Local History Research Contest]).

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The text presented here is a personal set of notes on how "Japan as the Land of Amaterasu" came into being.

It is not a finished academic work, nor does it claim to be one.

There may be details that require further revision or correction.

Even so, I believe that the overall framework is not misguided, and that it captures, with reasonable accuracy, the process by which the Yamato polity took shape with Amaterasu Ōmikami at its symbolic apex.

Regardless of its merits or shortcomings, I have chosen to preserve these notes here so that the memory of how "Japan as the Land of Amaterasu" was born may not be forgotten.

Part 1
Notes on HIMIKO

Himiko's Attire (Yayoi Museum)

Chapter 1

On the "Eight Undocumented Emperors" and the Origins of Japan

1. Considering Himiko's Era — What Are the "Eight Undocumented Emperors"?

To understand the era of Himiko, we must first reflect on the concept of the "Eight Undocumented Emperors" in ancient Japanese history, as well as Japan's own origins. These topics are inseparably linked to the historical setting in which Himiko appeared.

Below is a list of emperors from the first, Emperor Jimmu, to the ninth, Emperor Kaika. The reigns of the second through ninth emperors lack any verifiable historical records

The Nine "Mythical" Emperors and Their Recorded Lifespans

No.	Emperor	Lifespan in the Kojiki	Lifespan in the Nihon Shoki
1	Emperor Jimmu	127 years	137 years
2	Emperor Suizei	45 years	84years
3	Emperor Annei	49years	57years
4	Emperor Itoku	45years	77years
5	Emperor Kōshō	93years	114years
6	Emperor Kōan	123years	137years
7	Emperor Kōrei	106 years	128 years
8	Emperor Kōgen	57 years	116 years
9	Emperor Kaik	63 years	115 years

and are therefore collectively referred to as the "Eight Undocumented Emperors" (欠史八代, Kesshi Hachidai). Due to this absence of records, these early emperors—including even the first, Jimmu—are often considered mythical figures. In contrast, many scholars regard the tenth emperor, Sujin, as the first historically plausible sovereign.

The extraordinarily long lifespans listed here may reflect later editorial efforts to reconcile inconsistencies in the imperial chronology.

2. Why Is 660 BCE Considered the Beginning of Japan?

There is a long-standing belief that Japan was founded in 660 BCE. But how was this particular date determined?

The clue lies in the introduction of the Chinese calendar system during the reign of Empress Suiko. This system is based on the combination of the Ten Heavenly Stems (甲, 乙, 丙, 丁, 戊, 己, 庚, 辛, 壬, 癸) and the Twelve Earthly Branches (子, 丑, 寅, 卯, 辰, 巳, 午, 未, 申, 酉, 戌, 亥), along with the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water). These cycle in a sexagenary (60-year) pattern.

Within this cycle, particular importance is placed on the year "Shin'yū" (辛　酉), traditionally seen as a time of great

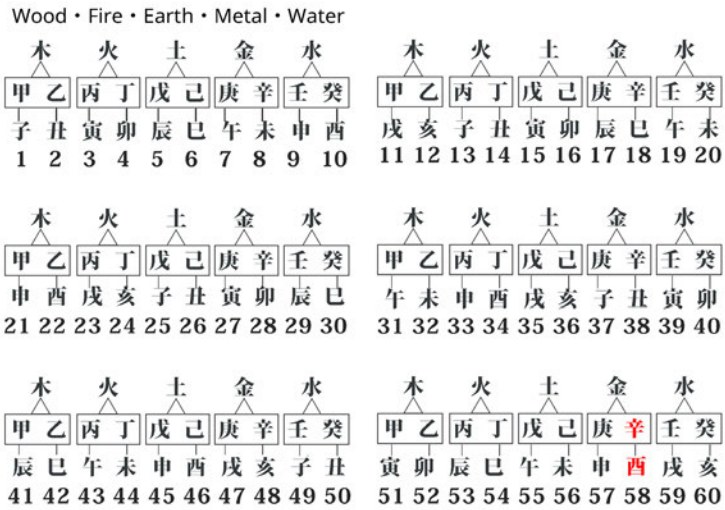
transformation. When this "Shin'yū year" occurs for the 21st time (i.e., after 1,260 years), it is regarded as an especially significant turning point.

By calculating 1,260 years backward from Empress Suiko's era, the result was 660 BCE—a date then retrospectively established as the foundation year of Japan. From there, emperors were assigned along the timeline to fill the gap.

To make the chronology line up, emperors for whom no birth or death records existed were given implausibly long lifespans. This suggests that, while official records were lacking, these sovereigns—referred to at the time not as emperors (tennō) but as great kings (ōkimi)—were real figures whose existence could not be ignored.

If these rulers had been entirely fictional, one might expect the compilers to invent additional names or adjust the sequence more freely. The fact that they did not suggests these individuals were part of an established oral or local tradition and thus could not be arbitrarily added or removed.

This leads to a crucial question: If these nine kings did exist, is it possible to determine their actual historical dates?



The Chinese calendar's sexagesimal system

3. Himiko and Historical Sources — From Myth to Record

In early Japan, written records did not yet exist. Himiko is mentioned solely in Chinese historical texts, most notably the Records of Wei on the People of Wa (魏志倭人伝 , Gishi Wajinden), a section of the Records of the Three Kingdoms (三国志).

Before the Wei dynasty, China was ruled by the Later Han. Its official history, the Book of the Later Han (後漢書),

includes a chapter titled "Eastern Barbarians" (東夷伝), which records that the countries of Wa (Japan) and Nakoku sent envoys to China.

In 57 CE, the King of Nakoku is said to have paid tribute to the Han court and received a golden seal inscribed with "King of the Na state, vassal of Han" (漢委奴国王). This event is famously depicted in Japanese history textbooks.

Later, in 107 CE, a ruler of Wa is recorded to have offered 160 slaves to the Han court. Then, in the late 2nd century, widespread internal unrest in the Wa region—referred to as the Great Disturbance of Wa—is documented. It is within this context that Himiko emerges in the Chinese accounts.

Taken together, these accounts imply that by the first century CE, centralized leadership—perhaps in the form of a great king—had already begun to take shape. While speculative, it is not unreasonable to situate the era of Emperor Jimmu around this same period.

By the time of the Wa unrest in the late 2nd century, the stage had been set for Himiko's appearance. Though the term "Yamato court" may be anachronistic, if we adopt it for convenience, we can begin to position Himiko within the broader flow of its early development.

Chapter 2

Himiko and the Yellow Turban Rebellion

1. Climate Anomalies and the Emergence of the Yellow Turbans

When we try to learn about Himiko, the first and almost only historical source that comes up is the Records of Wei on the People of Wa (魏志倭人伝). In fact, aside from this document, virtually no other textual records exist that directly reference her. That is why it is essential to first examine the relationship between the state of Wei and Yamatai—between Himiko and Wei.

Looking at the world beginning in the second century CE, one immediately notices a shift in global climate. The Earth appears to have entered a period of warming. In East Asia, this led to repeated droughts and irregular weather patterns, which in turn caused poor harvests and widespread hardship among the population.

During this time, China was under the rule of the Eastern Han dynasty. However, the dynasty was already weakened and could do little to alleviate the suffering of its people. Far from tending to the plight of the peasants, the government was mired in corruption and internal strife, dominated by the eunuch faction at court.

In the midst of growing resentment, a religious movement known as the Yellow Turban sect emerged. Preaching a

doctrine called the Way of Great Peace (太平道), the group called for social and political renewal.

Their teachings extended beyond revolution and reform to encompass healing practices and moral guidance. Central to their philosophy was the concept of introspection—the idea that illness could be cured by turning inward and activating one's own healing powers. The sect's spiritual and practical message resonated deeply with a population exhausted by decades of suffering.

Their rallying cry was:

"The Azure Heaven is dead; the Yellow Heaven shall rise. In the year of Jiazi, great fortune will come to the world."

In simple terms, this slogan declared the end of the Han dynasty and the arrival of a new era based on the virtue of Wood (木德), one of the Five Elements. Wood is symbolically associated with the color yellow. Thus, adherents of the movement wore yellow headscarves and came to be known as the Yellow Turbans. Under the leadership of a man named Zhang Jue, they rose in rebellion, determined to overthrow the decaying rule of the Eastern Han and establish a new, heaven-sanctioned order.

2. The Yellow Turban Rebellion

At the time of their uprising, the Yellow Turban movement is estimated to have numbered around 300,000 followers. In contrast, the Han dynasty's border defense forces had dwindled to just about 24,000 troops. In terms of sheer numbers, the rebel forces had an overwhelming advantage.

The Yellow Turban army began advancing from various regions of China toward the capital, Luoyang. Interestingly, the forces that stood against them were not the regular imperial army, but rather the militias and private armies of local warlords and aristocrats. Among these regional powers were figures who would later become central to the famous Three Kingdoms period—Cao Cao, founder of Wei; Liu Bei, founder of Shu; and Sun Quan, founder of Wu. These individuals would all rise to prominence during this era of conflict.

Thanks to the efforts of these regional warlords, the initially dominant Yellow Turban forces were suppressed in less than a year. Though the rebellion began in February of the year 184 CE, it was largely brought under control by December of that same year.

However, this was not the end of the story.

While the central leadership of the Yellow Turban movement was crushed, scattered remnants of their forces

remained active across various provinces. At the same time, the regional warlords who had helped suppress the uprising gained significant power and began to assert themselves independently. The weakening of the Eastern Han thus gave rise to a chaotic, fragmented period in which numerous military cliques vied for dominance.

This marks the opening act of the blood-stirring drama known as the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

3. The State of Wei and the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans

It was the state of Wei, led by Cao Cao, that recognized the potential of the surviving Yellow Turban forces. Through policies of appeasement led by Cao Cao and his son Cao Pi, Wei succeeded in winning over a massive contingent—some 300,000 troops—from the Qingzhou Yellow Turbans.

Qingzhou refers to the eastern region of ancient China, one of the Nine Provinces at the time, roughly corresponding to the northern and central parts of modern-day Shandong Province. It included a wide stretch of coastline along the Yellow Sea. This coastal region is believed to have been the stronghold of the remaining Yellow Turban forces.

Given that the Yellow Turbans had an estimated strength of

300,000 at the height of the uprising, and that after their defeat an equal number are recorded as having joined Wei's forces, it is likely that their numbers had not significantly diminished—in fact, they may have even grown.

Once incorporated, these former rebels became a formidable special unit within the Wei military. Their contribution was so significant that it was said:

"The military might of Wei began here."

Ultimately, in the year 192 CE, Wei absorbed the remnants of the Yellow Turbans and moved to unify the fractured Chinese empire under its banner.

The role the Yellow Turbans played in Wei's rise to dominance was indeed substantial. From the year 185 CE, immediately following the suppression of the rebellion, until their formal surrender in 192 CE, the remnants of the Yellow Turbans—numbering more than 300,000—continued to operate independently in the Qingzhou region, opposing Wei for seven years.

It is from this historical backdrop that my own hypothesis begins.

Let us now shift our attention to Japan. Japan has long been a nation that welcomed immigrants. Though we are now jumping forward in time, the precedent is clear:

When Baekje (Kudara) fell, many of its people sought refuge in Japan.

During the Song dynasty, when Manichaeism was

persecuted, followers of the faith fled to Japan.

Later, during the early Edo period, even in the midst of national isolation, many former subjects of the fallen Ming dynasty, along with cultural artifacts, found safe haven in Japan after the Qing conquest.

It wasn't just a matter of refugees. As iron production became widespread, many people from China and Korea migrated to Japan in search of forest resources needed for smelting. When climate shifts devastated grasslands, nomadic horse-riding peoples also made their way to Japan.

Even Emperor Jimmu is said to have crossed the sea and established a unified regime in Japan. Evidence suggests that various dynasties rose and fell, one after another. The myth of an unbroken imperial line is increasingly difficult to sustain under scrutiny.

In short, the connections among China, Korea, and Japan were likely far more frequent and dynamic than we might imagine today. This is the perspective we must keep in mind.

Returning now to the Yellow Turbans and their relationship with the state of Wei:

It is conceivable that, in negotiating their surrender, or perhaps even earlier, the Yellow Turban movement split into two factions:

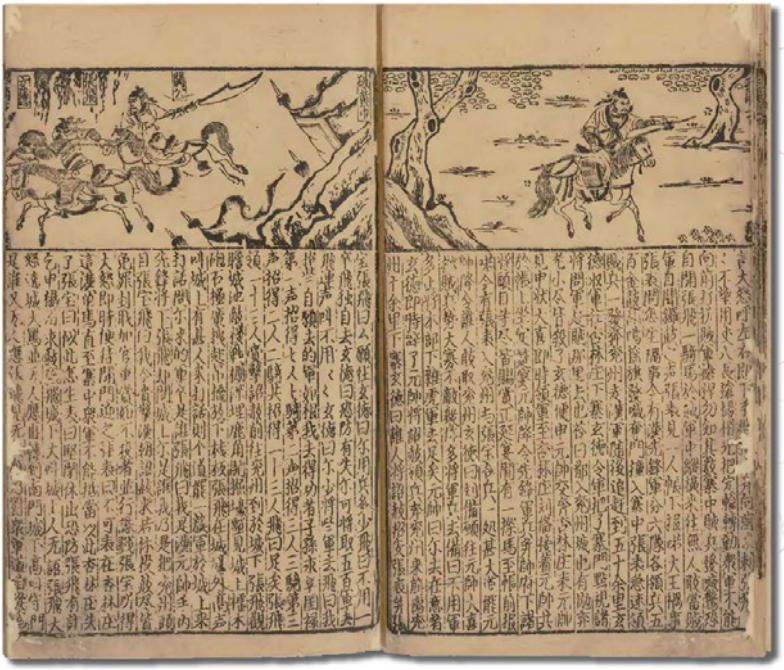
One group crossed the Yellow Sea and sought refuge in Japan.

The other accepted Cao Cao's terms and became an elite unit under Wei. Even if the latter were betrayed and destroyed,

the former could survive in Japan.

And what if, within the refugee group, there was a sacred female shaman—someone who had to be protected at all costs?

This is, of course, a speculative idea. But what if this woman was the daughter of Zhang Jue, the Yellow Turban leader? Whether or not that is the case, let us suppose they carried with them a revered woman, and a group dedicated to her protection set sail for Japan.



The Yellow Turban Rebellion as recorded in "Complete Illustrations of the Three Kingdoms" (National Diet Library Collection)

Map of Yellow Turban Forces

4. The Yellow Turbans and Japan

At that time, Japan — much like China — was embroiled in internal conflict.

According to the Records of Wei on the People of Wa, the Japanese originally had male rulers, but warfare and strife persisted. It was only after they appointed a woman as ruler that peace was finally restored. Her name was Himiko. She was a master of kido (鬼道) — literally, "the Way of Spirits"— an early form of Taoist-style shamanism. She remained unmarried, and her rule was supported by her younger brother.

"Originally, this country had male rulers.

But for seventy or eighty years, war and strife did not cease.

So the people united and chose a woman to be their ruler.

Her name was Himiko.

She practiced kido and could charm the masses.

Though she was advanced in age, she had no husband.

Her younger brother assisted in governing the land."

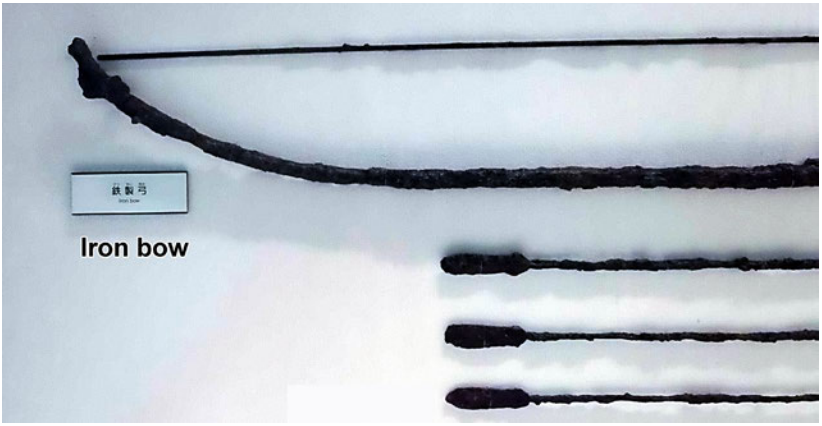
— Wei Zhi Woren Chuan (Records of Wei on the People of Wa)

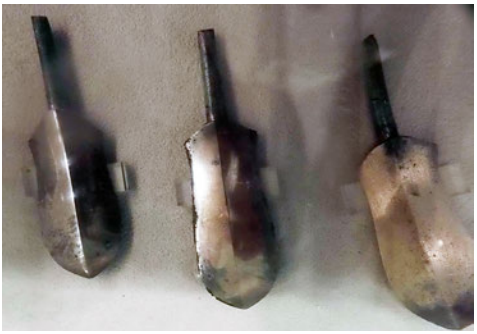
What if Himiko were in fact a survivor of the Yellow Turban movement — not only that, but a high-ranking female shaman who was safeguarded by a dedicated contingent of followers and brought across the sea to Japan?

What if these refugees, entrusted with her protection, arrived in Japan not only as spiritual seekers but as bearers of irrigation techniques, civil engineering skills, iron smelting knowledge, iron weapons, and iron farming tools — the very tools of civilization and centralized authority?

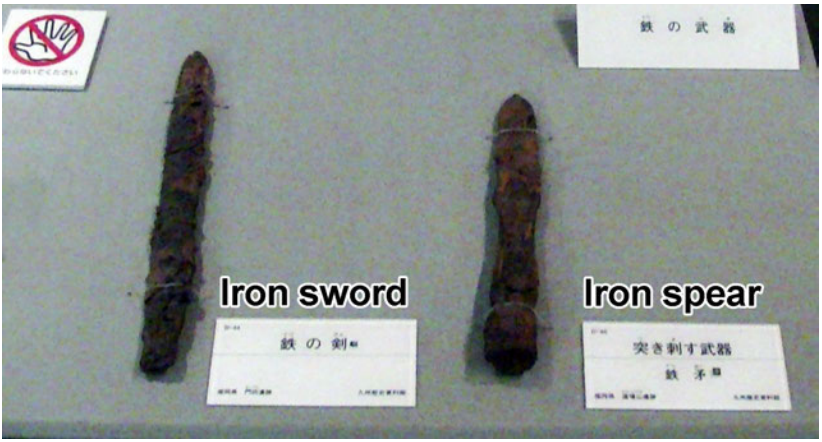
If so, then the Records of Wei's account — that inter-tribal conflict which had persisted for decades was suddenly brought under control by the rise of a woman ruler — would begin to seem all the more plausible.

Such a scenario suggests that Himiko's arrival and her rule were not simply matters of native development, but the result of a convergence of foreign knowledge, spiritual charisma, and military support brought from the continent in a time of upheaval.





Iron weapons
(Kashihara Archaeological
Research Institute Collection)



Chapter 3

The Three Sacred Treasures and Himiko

1. What Are the Three Sacred Treasures ?

Let's begin with the mirror. This is the Yata no Kagami, which is currently enshrined at the Inner Shrine of Ise Grand Shrine. According to legend, it was forged by the deity Ishikoridome no Mikoto to reflect the image of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, when she hid herself away in the Heavenly Rock Cave.

Up until the reign of Emperor Sujin, the mirror was enshrined within the imperial palace. However, due to the divine message (takusen) received by Yamatototohimomosohime no Mikoto—believed by some to be Himiko—it was deemed too sacred to keep in the palace. As a result, the mirror was moved by Yamato-hime through various provinces including Iga, Omi, Mino, and Owari, before finally arriving in Ise. There, the Inner Shrine of Ise Grand Shrine was established.

Next is the sword—the legendary Ame-no-Murakumo no Tsurugi, also known as the Kusanagi no Tsurugi. It is said that Susanoo no Mikoto, the younger brother of Amaterasu, discovered this iron blade inside the tail of the defeated eight-headed serpent Yamata no Orochi in Izumo.

Later, during the Genpei War, the Three Sacred Treasures were sunk into the sea at the Battle of Dan-no-ura along with Emperor Antoku. Of the three, the Kusanagi sword was never

recovered. A replica was later created and is now housed at Atsuta Shrine.

Finally, we come to the magatama—a curved jewel known as the Yasakani no Magatama. Of the Three Sacred Treasures, this is the only one still kept within the Imperial Palace.

In the myth of the Heavenly Rock Cave, it is said that the jewel was made by Tamanooya no Mikoto and hung with the Yata no Kagami from a sacred sakaki tree by Futodama no Mikoto to coax Amaterasu out of hiding.

Unlike the mirror and the sword, however, the magatama lacks dramatic or divine legends attached to it.

For this reason, the magatama has often been seen as the lesser of the three, and some researchers have even argued that the original regalia may have comprised only two items, not three.

The final site where the Yata no Kagami was enshrined in the Imperial Court — Remains of the Shiki Mizugaki Palace of Emperor Sujin (Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture)

The places where the Yata no Kagami was once venerated are known as "Moto-Ise." — Hibara Shrine, a Moto-Ise site in Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture

Kagami-tsukuri Shrine, dedicated to the mold used to cast the Yata no Kagami (Tawaramoto Town, Nara Prefecture)

2. What the Yasakani no Magatama Represents

Here, I'd like to offer a personal hypothesis—perhaps more intuition than theory. I believe the magatama was, in fact, the most important of the Three Sacred Treasures.

While both the mirror and the sword now enshrined at Ise and Atsuta are replicas, the Yasakani no Magatama is said to be the original artifact.

So what does this jewel represent? I suspect it symbolizes rice—or more specifically, the spirit of the grain—which formed the foundation of Yamato rule.

(That said, this idea of "magatama as a symbol of rice" is not based on any academic evidence, but rather my own intuitive speculation.)

If this is true, then it would make perfect sense that this particular treasure must not be taken out of the palace.

Rice was the basis of imperial rule, and the great court rituals such as the Kannamesai (sacred tasting festival) and the Niinamesai (harvest festival) became central duties of the emperor.

In fact, the first major ritual performed by a newly enthroned emperor is the Daijosai (Great Tasting Ceremony), which is essentially a special form of the Niinamesai.

In ancient times, another essential role of the emperor was the Kunimi—ritual surveying of the land.

Here is a poem attributed to Emperor Jomei:

Though there are many hills in Yamato,
It is Mount Kagu that rises most nobly.
Ascending it to survey the land,
I see the fields below smoking with life,
The sea shimmering with birds in flight.

Ah, what a wondrous land—our autumn-isle of Yamato!

And a famous poem by Emperor Nintoku:
From my high tower I gaze upon the land—
Smoke rising from every hearth,
The people's homes are thriving.

These "Kunimi" rituals, in which emperors ascended high places to view and bless the fertility of the land, clearly show that the foundation of governance lay in rice cultivation.

This is why I believe the magatama—symbolizing rice or the grain spirit—had to remain close to the emperor, enshrined within the palace. It was the most sacred treasure of all.

The rural landscape of Gose City, once called Akitsushima
— In front of the Mausoleum of Emperor Kōan
(Gose City, Nara Prefecture)

Diorama depicting rice cultivation in Himiko's era
(Yayoi Culture Museum, Osaka Prefecture)

This "Thunder Hill" served as a site for imperial observation during the Asuka period (Asuka Village, Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture)

3. Himiko and the Three Sacred Treasures

And now we arrive at the central point of this memo.

The three items symbolized by the regalia—the sword, the mirror, and the rice—may have been brought to Japan by none other than Himiko, the Yellow Turban forces, and the farmers who rose alongside them.

Let's begin with the sword.

The sword represents iron. The Yellow Turban army was a militarized force equipped with iron swords and iron armor. The elite soldiers from Qingzhou were so formidable that even the mighty Cao Cao of Wei chose to recruit them rather than fight them.

The legendary sword—whether the Ame-no-Murakumo or the Kusanagi—may symbolize the dramatic technological leap from bronze to iron weaponry and the awe it inspired.

Next, the mirror.

Here, we encounter the ideology of the Yellow Turban Rebellion: the teachings of Taiping Dao, an early form of Taoism.

One of the key concepts embraced by the Chinese peasants was a form of introspection akin to what we might call "self-reflection" or "inner observation" today. This belief held that by turning inward and facing oneself, one could heal even

physical illness.

This new approach—healing through self-awareness—spread rapidly among the people. And with it came the mirror: the first "tool" that allowed humans to face themselves.

Prior to this, water reflections were the only means. But with the appearance of bronze or iron mirrors, people could directly confront their own image.

As a sacred object, I believe the mirror symbolized the spiritual insights brought by Himiko and the early Taoist teachings.

Previously, Japan had ritual bells called dotaku, which produced sound to signal the sacred. But with the arrival of a new culture—the Yellow Turbans—the reflective mirror may have replaced the sounding bell as the spiritual artifact of choice.

Finally, the magatama.

As discussed, the magatama symbolizes rice or the spirit of grain—foundational to national identity.

I don't mean to suggest that Himiko and the Yellow Turbans introduced rice itself to Japan. Rice cultivation dates back to the Jomon period.

However, in terms of irrigation techniques and agricultural technology, Japan likely lagged far behind China.

This was a time when the Earth was undergoing a phase of global warming, marked by abrupt climate shifts.

It's quite possible that the "Civil War of Wa" was triggered

by crop failures due to extreme weather, causing unrest among agrarian communities.

Into this unstable world came advanced farming techniques from China.

The Yellow Turban Rebellion, at its core, was an uprising of farmers, guided by a religious movement. Most of its members were agriculturalists.

They brought with them the latest rice-farming technology, which triggered an agricultural revolution in Japan.

As a result, rice cultivation spread rapidly across the archipelago, laying the foundation for what would become the Yamato state.

Though the early stages of warming may have brought destructive weather, the eventual climatic stability likely created ideal conditions for agriculture.

Thus, the emergence of a rice-based Yamato kingdom—and its emblem, the Yasakani no Magatama—is no coincidence.

In short, the Three Sacred Treasures symbolize iron, Taoist-based shamanic thought, and rice cultivation.

It was Himiko and the Yellow Turban movement who may have introduced these elements to Japan.

Magatama (curved beads) from the Karakokagi Ruins(left), and the Torinoyama Kofun Cluster (right), Nara Prefecture

Bronze mirror excavated from the Makimuku archaeological site
(Sakurai City Center for Buried Cultural Properties, Nara Prefecture)

Iron tools excavated from the Makimuku archaeological site
(Sakurai City Center for Buried Cultural Properties, Nara Prefecture)

4. When Were the Three Sacred Treasures Instituted?

Lastly, a few thoughts on the historical moment when these treasures became formalized.

I plan to explore this further in a future memo on Amaterasu, but for now I'll say this:

Roughly 500 years after Himiko's era, in the aftermath of the Jinshin War (July–August 672 CE), the victorious Prince Ōama defeated his elder brother's Ōmi court and established a powerful centralized government.

I believe that it was during this period—after the Jinshin War—that the system of the Three Sacred Treasures was officially established.

At the heart of this initiative were Princess Uno no Sarara (later Empress Jitō) and her children by Emperor Tenmu—particularly Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu.

They created the myth of Amaterasu as the supreme deity, positioning the imperial family as her direct descendants.

And within that newly crafted mythos, elements of Himiko's story can be strongly sensed.

It was likely during this myth-making process that the Three Sacred Treasures were canonized.

I'll explore this connection in more detail in my memo on

Amaterasu.

For now, I plan to turn my attention to the next topic: tracing Himiko's footsteps after her arrival in Japan.

Postscript

After writing this piece, I learned that the mirror and the sword—two of the Three Sacred Treasures—are said to be associated with Dōkyō. If we assume that this information was brought by refugees from the Yellow Turban Rebellion, it becomes a plausible and convincing theory. Meanwhile, the third treasure, the magatama (curved jewel), which was added in Japan, appears to be a uniquely Japanese sacred item. In that sense, it may also serve as indirect evidence of just how significant it is to the Imperial Household.

Diorama of the "Water Festival," a ritual based on ancient waterworks (Kashihara Archaeological Institute) & Nango Irrigation Site in Gose City, Nara Prefecture

Chapter 4

Tracing Himiko's Footsteps in Japan

1. The Eastward Expansion of Yamatai

Mention Himiko, and people immediately think of Yamatai. Mention Yamatai, and the conversation turns to the ongoing "Yamatai Controversy": where exactly was this ancient kingdom located?

Why has this debate persisted for so long? Because no clear answer has emerged, and the academic world of history has largely avoided—or been unable to provide—any definitive conclusion. Many renowned historians refrain from addressing anything before the 4th century. As a result, the debate over Yamatai has become a sacred ground where amateurs can also participate freely. Adding to this, there are numerous archaeological sites across Japan that evoke the presence of Yamatai.

Thus, the Yamatai Controversy has become a tangled mess of interpretations based on the "Records of the Wei Commandery on the Wa People," the only surviving historical source. These interpretations vary depending on whether one reads the Chinese characters using Tang pronunciations or Wu pronunciations, leading to even further confusion.

If this sole record is unable to provide accurate information on Yamatai's location, then perhaps we should step back and examine the broader context of the times—the historical

circumstances before and after the period in question.

I hold deep respect for my mentor, Taike, who was not a historian but consistently taught that "the physical body is temporary; it is the heart that is real." Even he once remarked, "Yamatai was in Nara." Another mentor of mine, Professor Osamu Oba, a specialist in East Asian history, wrote a comprehensive research volume titled Does Himiko Sleep in Yamato?, in which he supervised the entire work and also supported the theory that Yamatai was located in the Kinai region.

As for me, I used to think, "It doesn't matter where Yamatai was." But, encouraged by Professor Taike to look into Himiko, I began researching and gradually came to believe that Yamatai was both in Nara and in northern Kyushu.

This belief arose from my growing conviction that Himiko was a refugee from China—specifically from the south—who fled the chaos of the Yellow Turban Rebellion. The southern regions of China were integral parts of a maritime network that included Korea and Japan, forming a vast East Asian cultural sphere.

As I discussed in Bottles No.2 and No.3, the Yellow Turban Rebellion marked a turning point in China. Out of it, the folk religion of Daoism began to be systematized and institutionalized. The key movements behind this development were the Way of Great Peace (Taiping Dao) and the Five Pecks of Rice movement (Wudoumi Dao), which were responsible for the uprising.

Unlike Confucianism, which devalues women, Daoism emphasized feminine power and later gave rise to many charismatic female sages and priests. In my earlier notes, I pointed out how rarely women appear in historical records of ancient Japan, Korea, and China—and upon closer examination, this scarcity is due to the deep-rooted influence of Confucian values. Meanwhile, Daoism seeped into local cultures like water into soil—deeply absorbed but rarely surfacing. Thus, only the Confucian aspects became visible on the surface.

I believe this Daoist cultural climate was precisely the soil in which "Himiko" was born.

Some members of the Yellow Turban movement fled famine, war, and plague in China, and sought to build a new utopia. They took to the seas, navigating the maritime routes across the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea, aiming for Japan.

I want to emphasize again: Himiko did not flee to Japan alone. She was a central figure—someone to be protected—and likely traveled as part of a fleet that included armed factions from the Yellow Turban or Wudoumi Dao movements, along with farming communities. They probably departed from Qingzhou, a suspected stronghold of the Wudoumi Dao, and made their way through Iki, northern Kyushu, Izumo, Kibi, and the Seto Inland Sea before finally reaching the Kinai region.

At key locations along this route, large settlements emerged—these became the foundations of what we know as

Yamatai. In this sense, we might even speak of an "Eastward Expansion of Yamatai."

Once in the Kinai region, the Karako-Kagi archaeological site stands out. I suspect this was a kind of pilot settlement—an experiment before entering the more significant Makimuku area. According to some scholars, the Karako-Kagi site was once the center of a powerful group, but at some point, its core population suddenly vanished, and the settlement was reduced to a more ordinary village. Around the same time, a massive settlement arose in Makimuku, Nara. I believe this later evolved into the final form of Yamatai.

Harunotsuji Site, Iki Island (Nagasaki Prefecture)

Distant View of the Harunotsuji Archaeological Site

Iki Island is also one of Japan's leading grain-producing regions

Yoshinogari Site (Saga Prefecture)

Yoshinogari Site (Saga Prefecture)

Oracle Ritual by a Priest-Queen (Yoshinogari Site)

Karako–Kagi Site (Tawaramoto, Nara Prefecture)

2. Himiko and the Origins of Japan

People tend to think of Himiko as an exceptional figure, disconnected from the mainstream of Japanese ancient history—almost like an alien. But that's simply not true. Himiko was a real woman with charisma who lived during the late 2nd to early 3rd century CE.

The real reason she seems detached from Japan's historical narrative lies in the "National Foundation Day" established in the Meiji era, which claims Japan began on February 11, 660 BCE. According to this framework, Himiko's era becomes a confusing anachronism, and her presence seems to float in a historical vacuum.

To clarify, let's briefly revisit the issue covered in Bottle No.1: how was Japan's "origin" date determined in the first place?

During the reign of Empress Suiko, the Chinese calendar system was introduced to Japan. It consisted of ten celestial stems (such as kō, otsu, hei, etc.) and twelve earthly branches (rat, ox, tiger, etc.), which combined with the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) to form a 60-year cycle—hence the concept of kanreki (a complete cycle of life).

Among these, the 8th stem shin and the 10th branch yu form the combination shin-yu. A theory known as the "Shin-Yu Revolution Hypothesis" claims that every 60 years, and

especially every 21 cycles (60×21 = 1,260 years), a major societal transformation occurs.

During Empress Suiko's reign, the calendar was introduced in a shin-yu year. Using this logic, people traced back 1,260 years to establish the "founding date" of Japan as February 11, 660 BCE. When they fit emperors into this timeline, many of them ended up having extremely long lifespans—some over 100 years.

Now that we understand this "start date" was a theoretical construct, we can reassess Japan's true historical beginning.

Looking at Chinese records like the Book of the Later Han, which mentions envoys sent from Japan to China, it seems a unified Japanese state may have emerged around the mid-1st century CE.

With this in mind, we can consider where Himiko fits into the lineage of Japan's ancient rulers.

Hashihaka Kofun, said to be the tomb of Himiko
(Sakurai, Nara Prefecture)

Makimuku Site, said to be the location of Yamatai-koku
(Sakurai, Nara Prefecture)

Reconstructed Model of Yamatai-koku
(Yayoi Culture Museum, Osaka Prefecture)

3. Himiko and Emperor Kōrei

Near the Kashihara Royal Hotel in Nara lies a crossroad called Joroku. About 500 meters east of there is Lake Tsurugi, and within this lake stands what appears to be the tomb of Emperor Kōgen—the 8th emperor of Japan. Some have speculated that he may have been Himiko's younger brother.

Of course, under the traditional origin date of 660 BCE, this timeline doesn't make sense. But if we accept that Japan's formation began around the mid-1st century CE, then the chronology becomes plausible.

Let's continue tracing backward. Before Emperor Kōgen, we have Emperor Kōrei (7th), Emperor Kōan (6th), and Emperor Kōshō (5th). These four emperors all share the character "Kō" in their names. Let's focus on Emperor Kōshō.

Imperial tombs—though not necessarily accurate—are maintained by the Imperial Household Agency, so they're relatively easy to locate. The tombs and palace sites of both Emperor Kōshō (5th) and Emperor Kōan (6th) are in Gose City, Nara Prefecture.

Interestingly, even Emperor Jimmu—the first emperor—is associated not with the current Kashihara Shrine, but with a smaller shrine located in the Kashiwara area of Gose. The site associated with the second emperor, Suizei, is also in Gose.

It appears the earliest capitals were built in the hilly terrain of Gose. This area is known for rice cultivation, and the transition from hill country to flatland rice fields likely corresponds to the regions historically called "Mizuho no Kuni" and "Akitsushima." It's fair to say that the nation of Yamato began here.

However, during Emperor Kōrei's time (the 7th emperor), the capital moved from the hills to the plains. His palace site is in Tawaramoto (Nara Prefecture), and his tomb is in Ōji, also in the plains. By the time of Emperor Kōgen (8th), the capital had reached Kashihara, where the site of Karusakaibara-no-Miya is located near Okadera Station.

Back to the theory: if Emperor Kōgen was Himiko's younger brother, then the shift to flatland capitals during Emperor Kōrei's reign suggests a key transition. Moving the capital to the plains implies either that the threat of attack had vanished or that they had developed enough military strength to withstand assaults. This would mean that the so-called "Great War of Wa" had ended.

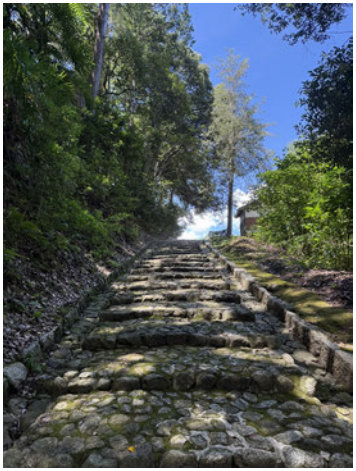
From Tawaramoto (Karako-Kagi) to Kashihara, the settlement of Makimuku was established, eventually housing Himiko's palace.

In conclusion, I believe that during Emperor Kōrei's reign, Himiko and her group of Chinese migrants—both military and technical—were absorbed into the Yamato polity. Himiko may have been adopted as a foster daughter.

This led to the emergence of the legendary Yamato Totohi Momoso-hime no Mikoto, a figure said to have played a vital role in quelling plagues and rebellions. I believe this figure was, in fact, Himiko—protected by the Yellow Turbans and evacuated from a chaotic China plagued by famine, disease, and war.

After this, Himiko and her group contributed to building a utopian "Mahoroba" in Yamato, supporting successive emperors.

It's also likely that she established Japan's unique shamanic tradition—something unseen elsewhere in East Asia.



Imperial Mausoleum of Emperor Kōan, the 6th Emperor
(Gose, Nara Prefecture)

Imperial Mausoleum of Emperor Kōrei,
the 7th Emperor (Ōji, Nara Prefecture)

Imperial Mausoleum of mperor Kōgen, the 8th Emperor
(Kashihara, Nara Prefecture)

Karako–Kagi Site (Tawaramoto, Nara Prefecture)

Part 2

Notes on AMATERASU

Chapter 1

The Great Thanksgiving Rite (Daijōsai) and the Beginning of Japan

1. The Daijōsai of the Reiwa Era

On May 1, 2019, Emperor Akihito (the Heisei Emperor) abdicated, and Crown Prince Naruhito ascended the throne. With his accession, the era name changed from Heisei to Reiwa, and six years have already passed.

When a new emperor ascends the throne, a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony known as the Daijōsai is held. By custom, if the enthronement occurs before July, the Daijōsai takes place in November of that year; if after July, it is held in November of the following year.

To understand the Daijōsai, we must first look at the Niinamesai. Both the Niinamesai and the Daijōsai are harvest rituals in which the emperor offers newly harvested rice to Amaterasu Ōmikami and the ancestral deities, and also partakes of it himself. The Daijōsai is the first Niinamesai performed by a new emperor, and is therefore a sacred, one-time rite of profound significance. At its heart are the rituals in the Yuki and Suki halls, performed in secret by the emperor alone—underscoring its status as the most important ceremony of enthronement.

Here is a brief chronology of the 2019 Daijōsai:

Selection of Sacred Rice Fields

On May 18, 2018—before the enthronement—the "Ritual of Rice Field Selection" was held in the forecourt of the Imperial Palace's Three Shrines, using turtle-shell divination (kiboku). One field, called Yuki, is chosen from the eastern provinces, and another, called Suki, from the western provinces. For the Reiwa Daijōsai, Tochigi Prefecture was selected as Yuki, and Kyoto Prefecture as Suki. On September 27, the sacred rice was ceremonially harvested: the varieties used were Tochigi no Hoshi (from Tochigi) and Kinuhikari (from Kyoto).

The Sacred Rice Harvest Ceremony

Construction of the Daijō Palace

Construction of the temporary Daijō Palace began on July 16, 2019, and was completed at the end of October. Built in the forecourt of the Daigokuden, the complex—housing the Yuki and Suki halls—is newly constructed

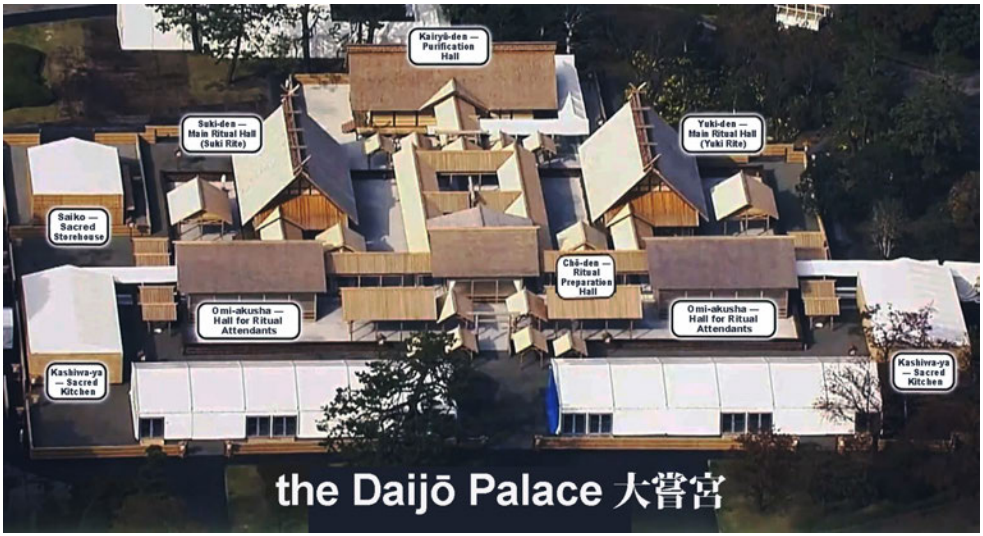
for each Daijōsai. The cost for the Reiwa structure was approximately 1.255 billion yen.

The Ceremony Itself

In October, the new emperor underwent a ritual purification (misogi). From the evening of November 14 to the early hours of November 15, 2019, the "Rite of the Daijō Palace" was conducted at the Imperial Palace. The Emperor offered the new rice to the deities and partook of it himself, praying for the peace of the nation and abundant harvests.

Post-Ceremony Events

On November 18, the Daikyō no Gi was held, where the Emperor hosted participants of the Daijōsai with food and sake. On November 21, the "Otakiage" rite was


Kairyū-den — Purification Hall
Suki-den — Main Ritual Hall (Suki Rite)
Yuki-den — Main Ritual Hall (Yuki Rite)
Saiko — Sacred Storehouse
Chō-den — Ritual Preparation Hall
Omi-akusha — Hall for Ritual Attendants
Omi-akusha — Hall for Ritual Attendants
Kashiwa-ya — Sacred Kitchen
Kashiwa-ya — Sacred Kitchen
the Daijō Palace 大嘗宮

performed, in which some of the unused timber from the ceremony was ritually burned; the fire was said to have been brought from the Kashiko-dokoro, the shrine dedicated to Amaterasu Ōmikami within the palace. From November 21 to December 8, the Daijō Palace was opened to the public. Afterward, it was dismantled, and the timber was repurposed as biomass fuel.

The Daijōsai of the Reiwa Era
(from a TV TOKYO news program)

The Daijōkyū (Imperial Ritual Complex), opened to the public after the Daijōsai Ceremony and before its dismantling

2. The Beginning of Japan

My interest in the Daijōsai began while studying Emperor Tenmu's nation-building efforts after the Jinshin War, when I discovered that it was Tenmu who first established this rite.

Even more astonishing was learning that so many other foundations of Japan trace back to him: the use of the title "Tennō" (Emperor), the adoption of "Nihon" as the nation's name, the institution of the twenty-year renewal (Shikinen Sengū) at Ise Grand Shrine, and the establishment of the Saikū Palace for imperial priestesses who served there. All of these were initiated by Emperor Tenmu and further developed by his successor, Empress Jitō.

When I realized this, I was struck with awe—it was as if goosebumps ran across my entire body.

And all of these policies were directed toward making Amaterasu Ōmikami the central deity of the nation.

In the next chapter, I will examine the new regime under Emperor Tenmu, beginning with the relationship between Empress Jitō and Prince Ōtsu. From there, I will consider Empress Jitō and Prince Kusakabe, the nation-building efforts of the Tenmu–Jitō court and their children, and finally the role of Princess Ōku and the decline of the priestess tradition. Through these, I hope to explore the relationship between Amaterasu Ōmikami and the formation of Japan as a nation.

Chapter 2

Prince Ōtsu and Empress Jitō

Introduction

When it comes to Prince Ōtsu, there seems little left unsaid. Countless articles, papers, novels, and travel writings have already taken him up as their subject.

What I attempt here is not to unearth some entirely new perspective, but rather to look back at him from the position of his stepmother, Empress Jitō—the one who ultimately condemned him to death on the charge of treason. In that story, I sense a sorrow that transcends the roles of victim and perpetrator, a sorrow born of human lives tossed about by the currents of power.

1. The Birth of Princess Unonosarara

Princess Unonosarara (later Empress Jitō) was born, together with her elder sister Princess Ōta, as a daughter of Prince Naka no Ōe (later Emperor Tenji) and Ochi no Iratsume, the daughter of Soga no Kurayamada Ishikawamaro.

Ishikawamaro is remembered as the man who betrayed the Soga clan. During the Taika Reform, he sided with Naka no Ōe and Nakatomi no Kamatari, helping to bring about the

downfall of his own kin. It was Kamatari who urged Naka no Ōe to secure Ishikawamaro as an ally, even suggesting that he take Ishikawamaro's daughter Ochi no Iratsume as his wife.

Thus Naka no Ōe married Ochi no Iratsume, and three children were born: Princess Ōta (eldest, birth year unknown), Princess Unonosarara (born in 645 CE), and Prince Takeru (born in 651 CE).

Particularly striking is that Unonosarara—destined to become Empress Jitō—was born in 645 CE, the very year of the Taika Reform. Her birth came in the midst of the political upheaval and tension surrounding the destruction of the Soga clan. Only four years later, Naka no Ōe drove his wife's father, Ishikawamaro—the very man who had been instrumental in the reform—to his death on charges of treason.

This incident is widely believed to have been a plot by Naka no Ōe and Kamatari. With it, Ishikawamaro perished, and the prominent names of the Soga clan were all but wiped out.

For Ochi no Iratsume, the reality that her husband had caused her father's death must have been unbearable. Not long after giving birth to Prince Takeru two years later, she took her own life. Some have wondered whether the heavy mental anguish she endured during pregnancy affected her son, for Prince Takeru was mute from birth and died young at the age of eight.

After their mother's death, Unonosarara, together with her elder sister Ōta and younger brother Takeru, was taken in by her grandmother, the retired Empress Kōgyoku (later re-

enthroned as Empress Saimei). Saimei, mother of Naka no Ōe, is said to have pitied the mute boy Takeru and doted on him.

The Nihon Shoki records, under the entry for the fifth month of Saimei's fourth year, that "Prince Takeru, the imperial grandchild, passed away at the age of eight." It further notes that Empress Saimei, unable to endure her grief, declared: "Let him without fail be buried with me in my own tomb in ages to come."

Princess Ōta, meanwhile, is described as a beautiful woman who strongly resembled her mother Ochi no Iratsume. Both her father Naka no Ōe and her grandmother Saimei cherished her. When Saimei died, Naka no Ōe interred his sister Princess Hashihito (both sister and lover to him) within Saimei's tomb, and on the same day buried his daughter Princess Ōta before it. Thus he had three beloved women—his mother Saimei, his sister Hashihito, and his daughter Ōta—laid to rest together.

By contrast, Unonosarara seems not to have possessed the same winsome nature as her sister or brother. To both her father Naka no Ōe and her grandmother Saimei, her presence appears faint, her figure little noticed.

In tracing her life—this girl who would later become Empress Jitō—we see the outlines of a childhood scarred by strife within her own family: a grandfather slain by her father's hand, a mother driven to despair and suicide, and a grandmother's household that offered her scant affection. It was in this lonely, loveless environment that she was raised, and that early solitude seems to have shaped the woman she became.

Tomb traditionally attributed to Soga no Kurayamada no Ishikawamaro (Taishi Town, Osaka Prefecture)

Mound believed to mark the burial of the head of Soga no Iruka, who was assassinated at the Itabuki Palace (Asuka)

Site traditionally identified as the Asuka Itabuki Palace, the stage of the Taika Reform

2. Princess Ōta

At the age of thirteen, Princess Unonosarara married Prince Ōama, younger brother of Naka no Ōe—later Emperor Tenmu. Remarkably, she entered this marriage together with her elder sister Princess Ōta; both sisters became consorts to Prince Ōama.

Here another figure enters the story: Nukata no Ōkimi. Renowned both for her beauty and for her poetry, she had already borne Prince Ōama a daughter, Princess Tōchi, around 653 CE. Thus, when the sisters Ōta and Unonosarara married Prince Ōama, his daughter Tōchi would have been about five years old.

Reconstructed octagonal Kengoshizuka Tumulus and its scale model (displayed outdoors alongside the actual site)

Koshizuka-no-Mikado Tumulus, located beside the Kengoshizuka Tumulus (said to be the tomb of Princess Ōta)

Yet Nukata caught the eye of Prince Naka no Ōe, Ōama's elder brother. He compelled Ōama to yield Nukata to him as his consort. In return—or so it seemed—Naka no Ōe gave his own daughters, Princesses Ōta and Unonosarara, in marriage to Ōama.

If this account is true, it must have been a humiliation of the deepest sort for the strong-willed Unonosarara. Not only was she forced into this arrangement, but even within marriage she had to compete with her own sister for her husband's favor.

In 662 CE, when Unonosarara was seventeen, she gave birth to a son by Prince Ōama—Prince Kusakabe. To have borne a child before her sister, and a male heir at that, was a source of immense joy and pride for her.

Yet only a year later, in 663 CE, her sister Princess Ōta gave

Kengoshizuka Tumulus, where Empress Saimei and Princess Hashihito are said to have performed music together (Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture)

birth to Prince Ōtsu. As he grew, Ōtsu revealed himself to be exceptionally gifted in both the literary and martial arts—outshining Kusakabe in many respects.

Prince Ōtsu is said to have been born at Nao no Ōtsu (modern-day Natsu in Fukuoka Prefecture), the forward base for Japan's doomed attempt to aid Baekje. His name, "Ōtsu," derived from his birthplace, just as his elder sister Princess Ōku had been named. Two years before his birth, Ōku had been born near the sea at Ōku (modern-day Ushimado in Kurashiki, Okayama), and so she was given that name.

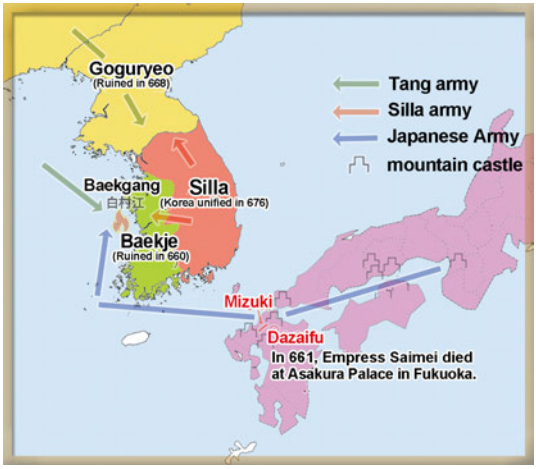
There are unresolved questions about the chronology—particularly whether Kusakabe was truly born a year before Ōtsu. For the purposes of this discussion, I proceed on the conventional understanding that Kusakabe was the elder, born in 662 CE.

What influence, then, did the rivalry between their mothers—Unonosarara (mother of Kusakabe) and Ōta (mother of Ōtsu)—have upon these two brothers?

In February 667 CE, Princess Ōta died suddenly. Unonosarara was twenty-two years old at the time. Ōta, said to have inherited her mother's delicate, translucent beauty, had died still very young.

For Unonosarara, her greatest rival was at last gone from the stage.

3. The Jinshin War



Five years later, Emperor Tenji—formerly Prince Naka no Ōe—died.

His death set off what is remembered as the largest civil conflict of ancient Japan: the Jinshin War.

Prince Ōama, who had withdrawn into monastic seclusion in Yoshino out of deference to his elder brother, left the mountains the moment Tenji died. He rallied the forces of the eastern provinces and marched against the Ōmi court, now leaderless with Tenji's passing.

Behind this struggle lay the great upheavals in East Asia. The Korean peninsula, once divided among three kingdoms, saw Baekje fall to the combined armies of Silla and Tang. Soon afterward, Goguryeo too was destroyed, leaving Silla as the unifier of the peninsula.

The Yamato court had long pursued a pro-Baekje policy. Continuing this line, the Tenji regime dispatched troops to support Baekje, only to suffer a crushing defeat at the Battle of

Baekgang (Hakusukinoe) in 663 CE. For a moment, it seemed as if the Tang–Silla forces might invade Japan itself.

As a defensive measure, the Mizuki Fortress was constructed at Dazaifu, and the capital was moved from Asuka to Ōmi.

Japan narrowly avoided the worst-case scenario because of a rift between Silla and Tang. After Baekje's fall, Tang launched its campaign to subjugate Goguryeo and, in the process, began to cast its ambitions even on its ally Silla. Perceiving this, Silla reached out to Japan. Yet the Ōmi court—that is, the Tenji regime—leaned toward submission to Tang, seeking alliance there instead. At the same time, it entertained hopes of backing Baekje refugees in a bid to restore Baekje and expand Yamato influence over the peninsula.

In contrast, Prince Ōama seems to have stood on a pro-Silla footing when he raised his forces against the Ōmi army, led by Prince Ōtomo, son of Tenji.

The defeat at Baekgang had pushed the Ōmi court toward becoming a vassal state under Tang. It was in this Japan, on the verge of subordination, that the civil war broke out. As suzerain, Tang would have been obliged to protect the Ōmi regime; the Jinshin War could easily have provided the pretext for Tang to intervene directly in Japan.

Yet it was Silla that blocked Tang's advance. In response to Tang's moves to dominate the peninsula, Silla launched a counteroffensive together with the remnants of Baekje and Goguryeo.

Thanks to this struggle on the Korean peninsula, Prince Ōama was able to press forward with his insurrection, ultimately overthrowing the Ōmi regime.

Thus, the Jinshin War was far more than a fraternal quarrel for power. It was a conflict born of necessity, shaped by the expansion of the Tang empire, the unification of the Korean peninsula, and the establishment of a new order within the Yamato state—a clash written into the very balance of power across East Asia.

Historic Site: Nishikori Ruins of the Ōtsu Palace, Ōmi Province
(Ōtsu City, Shiga Prefecture)

4. Empress Unonosarara Awakens to Power

For Princess Unonosarara, the Jinshin War carried profound significance.

Through that uprising, her relationship with Prince Ōama evolved beyond the bond of husband and wife into that of comrades in a joint struggle for the seizure of power.

The Tenmu regime, which emerged victorious, established an absolute monarchy: the emperor directly commanded military, ritual, and political affairs. Yet in one respect it differed—Tenmu is said to have consulted only one person in all matters: Empress Unonosarara. Their rule bore the character of a joint sovereignty between husband and wife.

Seen in this light, it is difficult not to sense Unonosarara's hand behind the very planning of the uprising, acting as a hidden strategist in the shadows.

The *Nihon Shoki* records: "The empress, throughout, aided the emperor in stabilizing the realm, ever offering sound counsel and fulfilling her duty of support in political matters." Clearly, she was deeply and actively engaged in governance.

Her flight from Yoshino, her march alongside Ōama, and the struggle to topple the Ōmi court must have been unforgettable experiences for her—an exhilarating political

adventure undertaken at her husband's side.

Together, they had founded a dynasty.

This, she could not have wished to relinquish to anyone. Least of all to Prince Ōtsu, the son of her rival sister Princess Ōta.

And yet, neither could she freely hand it to her own son, Prince Kusakabe. Stripped of maternal affection, the matter was brutally clear: whichever of the two—Ōtsu or Kusakabe—claimed power, resentment would remain, resentment that could all too easily ignite a second Jinshin War.

As a politician, Empress Unonosarara must have anticipated just such a future once Emperor Tenmu passed away.

5. The Children of Emperor Tenmu

Let us list the principal children of Emperor Tenmu.

With the daughters of his elder brother, Emperor Tenji:

With his empress, Princess Unonosarara: Prince Kusakabe
With Princess Ōta: Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu
With Princess Ōe: Prince Naga and Prince Yuge
With Princess Niitabe: Prince Toneri

With the daughters of powerful aristocratic families:

With Ioe no Iratsume, daughter of Fujiwara no Kamatari: Prince Niitabe
With Ōnu no Iratsume, daughter of Soga no Akae: Prince Hozumi

With the daughters of provincial chieftains:

With Amako no Iratsume: Prince Takechi
With Nukata no Ōkimi: Princess Tōchi
With Shishito no Kajihime no Iratsume: Prince Osakabe and Prince Shiki

Even with only those known, the total comes to twelve.
In addition, there were two sons of Emperor Tenji—Prince

Kawashima and Prince Shigeki. Together they make fourteen princes, of whom twelve were potential candidates for the throne. Yet, considering maternal lineage and political circumstances, the contest narrowed to two: Prince Kusakabe, son of the reigning empress, and Prince Ōtsu, son of her elder sister Princess Ōta.

After the death of Tenmu, the question was how to transfer the throne and the government he had seized through force of arms. Precisely because the monarchy had been won by revolution, it was essential to halt further upheaval and establish stability. And yet, the very pattern of conflict—Tenji versus Tenmu—threatened to repeat itself in the rivalry of Kusakabe versus Ōtsu. Even if neither prince himself harbored such intent, their entourages would surely contend to enthrone whichever figure favored their interests, making

Historic Site: Taki Ruins of the Yoshino Palace
(Yoshino District, Nara Prefecture)

strife inevitable.

It was for this reason that Emperor Tenmu gathered his leading sons and, together with Empress Unonosarara, journeyed to Yoshino—the very place where the Jinshin War had begun. Their destination was Yoshinomiya at Miyataki, deep in the Yoshino mountains. Those who accompanied them were six princes: Kusakabe, Ōtsu, Takechi, Osakabe, and Tenji's sons Kawashima and Shigeki.

Standing at the symbolic starting point of his reign, Emperor Tenmu addressed them:

"Today I swear with you in this courtyard that there be no discord even a thousand years hence. What say you?"

To this, Prince Kusakabe, foremost in the line of succession, replied:

Fujiwara Palace Ruins (Kashihara City, Nara Prefecture)

"May the heavenly and earthly deities, and the Emperor himself, be witness. We, your more than ten sons, though born of different mothers, will make no distinction among ourselves. United, we will follow the Emperor's command, and never oppose one another. Should we fail in this oath, may our bodies perish and our lines be extinguished. We shall never forget; we shall never forsake it."

Prince Ōtsu and the others likewise pledged: though of different mothers, they would stand as brothers, uphold the Emperor's will, and preserve the government without strife even a thousand years into the future.

This came to be called The Oath of Yoshino. That such an oath had to be formally sworn suggests how grave the succession issue already loomed.

Reconstructed scale model of the Saikū Imperial Residence
(Taki District, Mie Prefecture)

6. The Tragedy of Prince Ōtsu

Let us now consider who Prince Ōtsu truly was. By every account, he was a man of extraordinary gifts. Even *the Nihon Shoki*—compiled under the authority of the ruling regime that condemned him for treason—lavishes praise upon him, describing him as outstanding in both the literary and martial arts, and remarkable in appearance.

Was he, then, a hero of the Jinshin War? In fact, his elder half-brother, Prince Takechi, distinguished himself in that conflict, but not Ōtsu. At the time, Ōtsu remained within the Ōmi court, dearly cherished by Emperor Tenji. This was in part because he so strongly resembled Tenji's beloved daughter Princess Ōta, and in part because he displayed natural qualities of leadership. Yet I cannot escape the suspicion that he was kept there as a hostage.

Ōtsu was said to bear a striking likeness to Emperor Tenmu in his youth—possessing the same unruly, heroic spirit. Allowing such a man to remain with Ōama, even as a monk, would have been far too dangerous: who could predict what the two of them might attempt together? To keep Ōtsu close at hand, under watch, and as a fetter upon Ōama's freedom, must have seemed the wiser course.

Thus even after Tenji's death, Ōtsu was still held at Ōmi.

It was likely Nukata no Ōkimi who helped him escape. Once the beloved of Ōama, she had been taken as Tenji's consort despite already bearing Ōama a daughter, Princess Tōchi. When the Jinshin War broke out, she seems to have facilitated Ōtsu's flight from Ōmi back to Asuka.

Yet, no sooner had Emperor Tenmu died than Prince Ōtsu was accused of treason and arrested.

The Nihon Shoki records:

"In the first year of Shuchō (684 CE), on the ninth day of the ninth month, Emperor Tenmu passed away. The empress, without holding an enthronement ceremony, assumed the affairs of state. On the second day of the tenth month, Prince Ōtsu's treason was revealed. He was arrested, along with more than thirty others, including the Silla monk Hōshi Kōjin and the courtier Toneri no Tokinomichitsukuri, who had been deceived by him."

Site of Emperor Tenmu's temporary mortuary palace in Asuka (now the joint mausoleum of Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō)

Within less than a month of Tenmu's death, Ōtsu was seized and, astonishingly, executed the very next day.

"On the third day, Prince Ōtsu was put to death at the residence of Osada. He was twenty-four

years old. His consort, Princess Yamabe, rushed out with her hair disheveled and barefoot, and took her own life beside him. All who witnessed it wept aloud. Prince Ōtsu was the third son of Emperor Tenmu. His bearing was noble, his speech clear, and he was loved by Emperor Tenji. As he grew, he became gifted and learned, and especially loved literature. The flourishing of poetry in this era may be said to have begun with him."

The swiftness is staggering. The discovery of the supposed plot, the arrest, and the execution all came in rapid succession, without any serious investigation. Clearly, it was a preemptive measure—kill him first, and justify it later.

Site of Prince Ōtsu's former residence
(Kasuga Shrine, Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture)

What is more, by the end of that same month, most of those arrested were pardoned. Only Ōtsu was condemned as the instigator, while the others were excused as having been deceived and compelled to follow.

Yet even as it condemned him, the Nihon Shoki extolled him. Why would the compilers praise a supposed traitor? It suggests an unease, perhaps even guilt, among the ruling elite. Normally, as in the case of the Soga, the court would paint such figures as archvillains who had defied imperial authority, thereby justifying their destruction. But this was not done for Ōtsu. Likely, too many knew his true character, and a blatant falsehood would not stand.

Site of Prince Ōtsu's former residence, with a stray cat
(Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture)

In truth, the real question confronting Empress Unonosarara was this: **How can the regime be preserved in peace after Tenmu's death?** Her ultimate answer seems to have been the drastic measure of eliminating Ōtsu. For if either Ōtsu or Kusakabe were to inherit, the other's faction would inevitably feel aggrieved, and that grievance would ignite a second Jinshin War.

Having dealt with Ōtsu, only Kusakabe remained. Perhaps, had the absolute authority of the emperor already been firmly established, Kusakabe might have proved a steadier successor than the bold, heroic Ōtsu. But the institution of the emperor's absolute sovereignty was still only in its formative stage. Surely, during the long mourning for Tenmu, the empress's heart was torn by uncertainty.

Then tragedy struck again. Prince Kusakabe, who had served as chief mourner during Tenmu's funerary rites (from September 686 CE to November 688 CE), died suddenly in April of the following year at the age of twenty-seven. Officially his death was of illness, but the cause remains unknown. Some have wondered whether, after Ōtsu, Kusakabe too was taken by the empress's hand. The truth lies in the shadows of history. Yet more recently I have come to feel it may have been Kusakabe's own choice—that he longed for death.

Perhaps suicide was the only resolution he could see, the only way to contain the strife, the final cry of his anguished heart.

In another age, Kusakabe and Ōtsu might have been true

friends, good companions, and brothers united. Which of them was elder remains uncertain, for the details of Kusakabe's birth are obscure.

Site of the former Iware Pond, now reclaimed (Kashihara City, Nara Prefecture)

7. Reflections on the Death of Prince Ōtsu

On October 1, 686 CE (the ninth day of the ninth month of Shuchō 1), Emperor Tenmu passed away. Two days later, in the southern court of the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace, a temporary funeral hall (mogari no miya) was erected. The mogari was the rite in which the body was laid in provisional repose, the living bid their farewells, and prayers were offered for the deceased's return to life.

Although Buddhism had already been introduced by this time, cremation was not yet practiced. The mogari continued until the body had decayed to bone, when death was undeniable. The building in which the body was kept during this period was called the mogari no miya. Ordinarily such rites lasted about half a year, but in Tenmu's case they continued for two years and two months—an unprecedented length. Perhaps this was because Prince Ōtsu's alleged treason came to light during the mourning, or perhaps it reflected the empress's own wavering heart.

The rites began on October 16, 686 CE (the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month). Eight days later, Prince Ōtsu's conspiracy was "discovered." It is likely that he was seized on the very grounds of the funeral hall and then taken to his

residence at Osada.

The site of his residence at Osada is today occupied by Kasuga Shrine, an oddly secluded space thick with great trees amid a bustling town. There, at the roots of those trees, I once saw a stray cat stir from its nap and look curiously at me.

In the film "Kūkai", a black cat appears as the guardian of Yang Guifei's coffin. Likewise, to see a cat suddenly rise at the site of Ōtsu's residence was startling—as though it too were guarding his memory.

From the Osada site to the former Iware Pond is about 2.5 kilometers, ten minutes by bicycle. Though filled in today, in ancient times the pond was large enough for boating.

It is said that, on the way from Asuka to Osada under guard, Ōtsu composed his final poem as he passed the pond:

Shall I see the ducks crying on Iware Pond,
draped in creeping vines, only this day,
before I vanish into the clouds?

From the Asuka palace site to Iware Pond was about 3.6 kilometers, some fifteen minutes by bicycle today.

The Nihon Shoki states that Ōtsu was put to death at his home. Yet I cannot help but imagine otherwise: that he died by strangulation—or perhaps by drowning—at the edge of that pond.

Blood was regarded as pollution, detested above all. Thus royals and ritual officials were rarely executed by the sword; strangulation was the usual means. Yet in Ōtsu's case, water

seems to haunt the memory—one envisions him struggling in the depths, hearing the cries of ducks above.

Perhaps he died there at the pondside, his body afterward borne by horse to the residence where Princess Yamabe awaited him. Seeing her beloved returned as a corpse, she, in despair, followed him in death.

Standing at the site of Iware Pond, these images flood the mind. Upon a boulder there is carved his final verse:

Shall I see the ducks crying on Iware Pond,
draped in creeping vines, only this day,
before I vanish into the clouds?

Memorial stone inscribed with Prince Ōtsu's death poem, placed at the former site of Iware Pond (Kashihara City, Nara Prefecture)

Conclusion

Two years after Ōtsu's execution, in November 688 CE (the second year of Jitō's reign), Emperor Tenmu's remains were at last interred in the Ōuchi Mausoleum, closing the unprecedented two years and two months of mogari.

In the following January 689 CE (February by the Western calendar), Empress Jitō formally ascended the throne. Then, in May of that same year, Prince Kusakabe died suddenly at the age of twenty-seven, never to succeed.

As for Prince Ōtsu's burial place, one site lies atop the male

Tomb of Prince Ōtsu on Mount Futakami
(Katsuragi City, Nara Prefecture)

Ryūō Shrine, established to appease the spirit of Prince Ōtsu (within the grounds of Shin-Yakushi-ji Temple, Nara)

peak of Mt. Futakami, and another, an anonymous tumulus at Toritaniguchi at its foot. Some suggest the latter is the true grave.

I have visited both sites more than once. At first, my impression was firm: the Toritaniguchi tumulus must be his resting place.

Yet in writing this essay, approaching Ōtsu through the perspective of Empress Jitō, a different thought has struck me: perhaps both are his graves.

The very place-name "Toritaniguchi" hints at a site of exposure. Before the arrival of Buddhism, cremation was unknown. Even after its coming, the bodies of common folk were often abandoned in the mountains. In Kyoto's Toribeno, corpses were suspended in trees to be consumed by birds—a form of sky burial.

Toritaniguchi, lying in the valley at Futakami's base, may have been such a place. If the summit of Mt. Futakami, "Heaven's Futakami," was a sacred source of "heavenly water," then Toritaniguchi was its earthly counterpart: "Earth's Futakami," a realm of the dead.

Thus, the tumulus at Toritaniguchi may have been the first burial site of Prince Ōtsu, executed as a traitor.

Later, when Kusakabe too died an untimely death, the cause

was obscured by attributing it to Ōtsu's vengeful spirit.

With Empress Unonosarara enthroned as Empress Jitō, her vision at last reached a milestone. The throne was passed without bloodshed, and together with her late husband Tenmu, she set Japan on its first steps toward a new ritsuryō state.

Her aim was to have the throne succeed not to Kusakabe himself, but to Kusakabe's son, Prince Karu (later Emperor Monmu). Succession to a grandson was unprecedented—save for one mythic precedent. For in the age of the gods, it was Amaterasu Ōmikami who entrusted rule not to her own child, but to her grandson Ninigi no Mikoto, sending him down to earth with the Three Sacred Treasures to govern Japan.

But that is a tale for another chapter.

Toritaniguchi Tumulus at the foot of Mount Futakami
(Katsuragi City, Nara Prefecture)

Chapter 3

Princess Ōku and Princess Chūjō

Introduction

Have you ever heard the story of Princess Chūjō?

If you live in Katsuragi or its surrounding region, it is a tale that everyone knows. Yet, once you step outside this area, surprisingly few people are familiar with it.

Many of you may know the story of Snow White. What is fascinating is that the first half of Princess Chūjō's story is almost identical to Snow White. But please don't dismiss it by saying, "So this is just a copy of Snow White." After all, Snow White only appeared in the 19th century in the Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales.

By contrast, Princess Chūjō lived during the Nara period in

"The Tale of Princess Chūjō," beloved even in the Edo period
(Katsuragi Historical Museum, Nara Prefecture)

the 8th century. She is remembered at Taimadera Temple in Nara, where she is said to have woven the Taimadera Mandala, an embroidered vision of the Buddha's world.

Her tale endured as a legend, passed down for generations. By the Kamakura period, it was written down in The Record of Taimadera, the temple's founding chronicle. In other words, long before Snow White—by more than 300 years—it had already been preserved as a piece of literature.

Now you may wonder: what connection could there be between Princess Chūjō and Princess Ōku?

Before we come to that, let me first summarize the story of Princess Chūjō.

Illustrated narrative of The Tale of Princess Chūjō
(Taimadera, Nara Prefecture)

1. The Tale of Princess Chūjō and Princess Ōku

When the capital was still in Nara, the Minister of the Right, Fujiwara no Toyonari, took as his wife a beautiful lady known as **Murasaki no Mae**. The two lived in harmony, and together they prayed to the Buddha at Hasedera Temple for the blessing of a child. Their prayers were answered with the birth of a lovely daughter, Princess Chūjō, whom they cherished dearly.

The family lived happily, but tragedy struck when Princess Chūjō's mother fell gravely ill and passed away. Toyonari later remarried a woman named **Teruhi no Mae**. Though beautiful,

Sekkō-ji at the foot of Mt. Futakami (Katsuragi, Nara Prefecture)

Teruhi was consumed by jealousy. She could not bear the sight of Chūjō, who was not only more beautiful than herself but also beloved by everyone. She scolded her harshly, tormented her with cruelty, and finally, filled with resentment, plotted her death.

When Toyonari was away on an official post in the provinces, Teruhi seized her chance. She ordered a retainer to kill the girl, declaring, **"If only that child were gone…"**

But the retainer, moved by the princess's gentle and innocent nature, could not bring himself to harm her. Instead, he reported back that he had done as ordered, while secretly hiding Chūjō deep in the mountains, where he and his wife raised her as their own.

On his return from the provinces, Toyonari was told his daughter had died. Yet one day, while hunting in the mountains,

Main gate of Sekkō-ji (Katsuragi, Nara Prefecture)

he stumbled upon her alive. Learning the truth from the retainer, he resolved to bring her back to the capital.

Chūjō, however, had already made up her mind. She carried within her the sorrow of being separated from her late mother, the pain of enduring her stepmother's malice, and a deep awareness of the heaviness of human karma and suffering. Out of compassion for those who shared such sorrows, she decided to renounce the world and become a nun at Taimadera Temple, dedicating herself not only to her own salvation but also to the hearts of all people.

There, in days of prayer and self-questioning, she wondered how people might be freed from suffering. One day, a voice resounded in her heart:

"Gather lotus stalks, spin their fibers into thread, and weave a mandala."

"Dyeing Well" where Princess Chūjō is said to have dyed lotus threads (within Sekkō-ji grounds)

Thus, after much hardship, Chūjō completed the great **Taimadera Mandala**. Having fulfilled her vow, she was welcomed by the Buddha and departed for the world where her mother awaited her.

Such, in brief, is the story of Princess Chūjō. Yet as I pondered her tale and the Taimadera Mandala, another figure began to emerge in my mind: Princess Ōku, who lived in an even earlier time. She was the elder sister of Prince Ōtsu—the ill-fated royal whom I wrote about in the section **"Prince Ōtsu and Empress Jitō."**

The work that famously connected Prince Ōtsu with Princess Chūjō is Shinobu Orikuchi's novel "*The Book of the Dead*". *Reading* it, I cannot help but feel that Orikuchi himself sensed a deep resonance between the image of Princess Chūjō and that of Princess Ōku.

Hall of Tonsure for Princess Chūjō
(within Taimadera grounds)

2. The Centralization of the Gods

Let us recall for a moment the story of Prince Ōtsu from the previous section.

Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu were siblings, born of Emperor Tenmu and Princess Ōta. Princess Ōta had a younger sister, Princess Unonosarara (later Empress Jitō). Both sisters became consorts of Tenmu, and between Unonosarara and Tenmu a son was born—Prince Kusakabe, who was perhaps a year older than Prince Ōtsu.

Ordinarily, Princess Ōta would have been empress, and her son, Prince Ōtsu, would have naturally become crown prince. Yet Princess Ōta died young, leaving her children, **Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu**, without support.

Moreover, their aunt, Princess Unonosarara, was not a gentle and graceful figure like her elder sister. She was politically astute, ambitious, and had fought side by side with her husband in the Jinshin War. Having toppled the Ōmi court with her husband and ascended to the throne as empress, she increasingly saw Prince Ōtsu as an obstacle. Indeed, his brilliance, inherited from his father, became a source of potential conflict. Whether or not he or her own son Kusakabe took action, the factions surrounding them might easily ignite a second Jinshin War.

Thus unfolded the tragedy of Prince Ōtsu, which I have already discussed in "Prince Ōtsu and Empress Jitō." Here, however, I will turn our attention to Princess Ōku.

After emerging victorious in the Jinshin War and establishing his court at the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace, Emperor Tenmu began the work of postwar reforms.

His foremost priority was centralizing the power of the great clans. And the method he first employed was the centralization of the gods they worshiped.

The victory in the Jinshin War had been possible thanks to the support of the eastern clans, and above all because of the protection of their sun goddess, Amaterasu Ōmikami. Proclaiming that victory came through her divine aid, Tenmu elevated Amaterasu as the supreme deity of the state. Under her he organized the pantheon: the gods who had accompanied the heavenly descendants at their descent were defined as

A diorama of the restored Fujiwara Palace
(Nara Prefecture)

Amatsu-kami (heavenly deities), while the native deities were classed as **Kunitsu-kami** (earthly deities). In this way, the gods themselves were brought under a system of central authority.

A parallel comes to mind from the Korean historical drama The *Goryeo–Khitan War*, now popular on television. The drama depicts not only the kingdom's defense against Khitan invasions but also, with equal intensity, the internal struggles with powerful aristocratic clans. It shows vividly how curbing the power of these clans was the key to unifying the nation.

The same held true for Japan. Emperor Tenmu had risen to power by defeating the Ōmi regime with the help of the clans, and he knew well the threat their strength could pose. After the Jinshin War, his first priority was to draw the military and economic power of the clans into the absolute authority of the throne.

Monument marking the site of the Saikū Palace
in Saikū Forest (Meiwa, Mie Prefecture)

The centerpiece of this policy was the enthronement of Amaterasu and the myth of the Heavenly Descent. By exalting Amaterasu, long revered by maritime peoples of the eastern provinces, as the sole and absolute deity, and by declaring that the imperial family—possessors of the Three Sacred Treasures bestowed by Amaterasu—were the rightful rulers of the earth, he established a divine hierarchy into which all clan deities were subsumed beneath Amaterasu.

It was for this reason that the Ise Grand Shrine was established, and a new system was created in which a woman from the imperial family would be chosen to serve the sun goddess as her priestess.

This was the beginning of the **Saiō** (Imperial Priestess) system.

But what exactly was the Saiō? To explain, let me first share a short travel essay I once wrote about the institution.

Uji Bridge and Great Torii leading to the Inner Shrine of Ise Grand Shrine (Mie Prefecture)

3. Princess Ōku, the First to Serve as Saiō

On one of my trips for work to Ise, I was driving along the old Ise Highway with my son at the wheel. After crossing the Kushida River, a sign caught my eye: "Forest of the Saiō," "Saikū Historical Museum," and "Saikū Historical Experience Hall."

The moment I saw it, I could not shake the feeling that I must go there. I asked my son, "Sorry, but could you turn off here?" And so, we veered right, heading straight toward the Forest of the Saiō.

The word **Saikū** can be read as **saigū** or **itsuki no miya.** But what exactly was the Saiō? At one time, my interest lay mainly in early modern encounters between Japan and Europe, especially the cultural clashes surrounding Christianity. That study came to a kind of conclusion for me after finishing my book "*The Renaissance of the Orphans*".

Later, I moved from the Kanto region back to Kansai and settled in Umami, Kōryō Town, Kitakatsuragi District. There, I felt as if I had stepped right into the stage where the nation of Japan was being formed—into the very heart of ancient history spanning from the reigns of Emperors Kinmei and Bidatsu, through Empress Suiko, and on to Emperor Tenmu.

The Makino Kofun along my walking path is said to be the tomb of Prince Oshisaka no Hikohito no Ōe, son of Emperor

Bidatsu. Nearby, the Nikiyama Kofun stands in the district of Akabe, where Princess Tōchi is believed to be buried. The Mitaruyama Kofun, said to be the resting place of Prince Takechi, lies within Mitaruyama Park. Wherever I went, I found myself surrounded by the sites of Japan's formative age. Hōryūji Temple is a twenty-minute bike ride away, Asuka about an hour and a half, Hashihaka Kofun—the tomb attributed to Queen Himiko—and Ōmiwa Shrine, as well as Hibara Shrine (the so-called "Original Ise"), are all within reach of my bicycle. Even the trailhead to Mount Futakami is only thirty minutes away. Living in such a place, how could my heart not turn toward ancient history?

Ruins of the Saikū Palace (Meiwa, Mie Prefecture)

Above all, my thoughts were drawn to Mount Futakami and to Prince Ōtsu, who rests there. And whenever I thought of him, I could not help but recall his elder sister by the same mother, Princess Ōku. She too had once served as Saiō in Ise, but when her brother Prince Ōtsu was executed on charges of treason, she was released from her office. Far away in Ise, she composed a poem in mourning for her brother:

"Though I am but a mortal, from tomorrow I shall see
Mount Futakami as my younger brother."

Stone monuments inscribed with this poem can still be found throughout the area around Futakami.

To my shame, my own knowledge of the Saiō was vague at best. I only knew that women of the imperial family were appointed, and I vaguely assumed the office was located somewhere within Ise Shrine itself. In truth, the name and the idea of the Saiō had long sunk to the depths of my consciousness. Yet, seeing the sign for the Forest of the Saiō in Ise, the memory suddenly surged to the surface.

At the site of the Saikū, a plaque erected by the Ministry of Education explains that the remains are those of the Saiō's palace and the offices that administered her duties, dating back as far as the Asuka and Nara periods.

But what role did the Saiō, also known as the Saigū, actually serve, and how was she chosen? According to "*The Tale of the*

Saiō" by Itsu Nakano, "From their early years to the bloom of youth, more than sixty noble princesses lived in the serene coastal land of Ise, devoting themselves wholly to pure service of the gods."

In other words, the Saiō was an unmarried princess dispatched from the capital to serve Amaterasu at Ise Grand Shrine on behalf of the emperor.

The system was established during the time of Princess Ōku, elder sister of Prince Ōtsu, and it continued for about 660 years until the service of Princess Shōshi, the last Saiō. The youngest appointee was only two years old, the oldest thirty. Normally an imperial princess was chosen, but if no princess was available,

Outdoor reconstruction model of the Inner Palace
of the Saikū (Meiwa, Mie Prefecture)

the daughter of a prince might be appointed instead. Each time a new emperor ascended the throne, the Saiō also changed. Selection was made by divination, and the chosen princess would first reside in a Saikū, a preparatory palace within the capital, where she purified herself and learned the knowledge required of a Saiō.

The photograph here shows the **sōkaren**, a palanquin in which the Saiō traveled, crossing the Suzuka Pass to make her way from the capital to Ise.

A Saiō would normally return to the capital in a grand procession, called taige, when the emperor died or one of her parents passed away. However, Princess Ōku was dismissed when her brother Prince Ōtsu was condemned. In such cases, the return was called an "accident," and the Saiō was quietly escorted back to the capital. Similarly, if a Saiō was found to have had relations with a man, she too would be dismissed as an "accident."

When a Saiō completed her service and returned safely, her procession retraced the route by which she had traveled to Ise. But when she was dismissed as an "accident," she was compelled to return secretly, by a different road.

4. Princess Ōku After Leaving Her Post as Saiō

Let me now set down, as far as is known, the life of Princess Ōku in the form of a chronological outline.

661 CE – *Born the daughter of Emperor Tenmu (then Prince Ōama) and Princess Ōta. It is said that she was named "Ōku" because her mother gave birth to her near Ōku in present-day Okayama Prefecture, while accompanying her father on his journey to Tsukushi for the Baekje campaign.*

663 CE – *Her younger brother, Prince Ōtsu, was born in Naotsu (modern-day Natsu, Fukuoka Prefecture). Like his sister, he was named after the place of his birth, not after Ōtsu Palace in Shiga.*

667 CE (2nd month) – *Their mother, Princess Ōta, passed away.*

672 CE (1st month) – *Their uncle, Emperor Tenchi, died.*

672 CE (7th month) – *The Jinshin War broke out.*

673 CE – *Victorious in the Jinshin War, Emperor Tenmu established the Saiō system. Princess Ōku, at age twelve, was appointed as the first Saiō.*

674 CE – *Princess Ōku traveled to Ise to take up residence at the Saikū.*

686 CE (10th month) – *Prince Ōtsu was executed at Asuka.*

(Shortly before this, he had visited his sister at the Saikū, despite its prohibition of men.)

686 CE (11th month) – *Princess Ōku, implicated in her brother's rebellion, was dismissed from her office as Saiō at age twenty-five.*

[Sixteen-year gap]

ca. 694 CE – *The Golden Hall of Shōfuku-ji (the ruins now known as Natsumi Haiji), founded on her vow, was completed. This is confirmed by stamped clay ornaments discovered on site.*

702 CE (1st month) – *Princess Ōku died, likely at the age of forty-one.*

725 CE – *Shōfuku-ji was completed, with the lecture hall and pagoda added at this time.*

Foundation of the Kondō (Golden Hall) at Natsumi Temple (Shōfuku-ji) — completed in 694 (Nabari, Mie Prefecture)

What became of Princess Ōku after her dismissal remains unknown. We know the date of her death, but not where she died.

There is, however, one account.

A Heian-period text, "*the Origin Story of Yakushiji",* claims that Princess Ōku built a temple called Shōfuku-ji in Nabarigun, Iga Province, to honor Emperor Tenmu:

"Princess Ōku was at first a Saiō. In the second year of Jinki (725), for the sake of Emperor Jōgen (Tenmu), she established Shōfuku-ji, in the place known as Natsumi, originally in Nabarigun, Iga Province."

Yet some say the temple was not truly for Tenmu, but rather to pray for the repose of her brother, Prince Ōtsu.

There is a puzzle here: *t"he Origin Story of Yakushiji"* gives the

Molded Buddha plaques that once decorated the Kondō walls of Natsumi Temple (Shōfuku-ji)

temple's founding date as 725, more than twenty years after Princess Ōku's death. But this mystery proved surprisingly easy to resolve. When I visited the site of Natsumi Haiji in September 2025, I saw fragments of gilded clay ornaments from the Golden Hall. On them was stamped the cyclical year "Kōgo," which corresponds to 694. This proves the Golden Hall was already completed by that date.

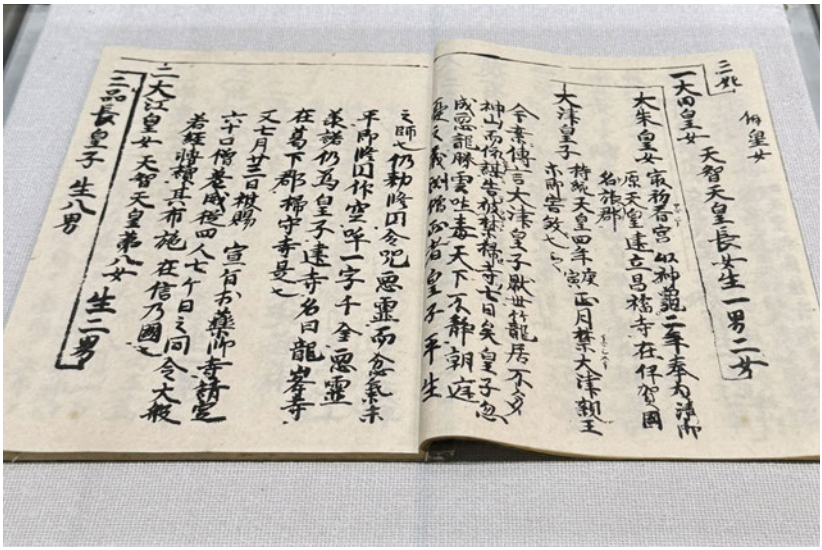
The next question is funding. Princess Ōku, dismissed from her office because of her brother's rebellion, could not have commanded a state-sponsored project, even as a member of the imperial family. It seems more likely that local powerful clans acted as patrons, moved by her vow. There is also the possibility that her cousin, Empress Genmei, who had been the consort of Prince Kusakabe, played a role.

Foundation of the pagoda at Natsumi Temple (Shōfuku-ji)
— the Lecture Hall and Pagoda were completed in 725

To recall: during the Taika Reform, Soga no Kurayamada no Ishikawamaro's daughters—Ōchi no Iratsume and her younger sister Mei no Iratsume—both married Emperor Tenchi (Prince Naka no Ōe). Empress Genmei was the daughter of Mei no Iratsume, making her a cousin of Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu. She had witnessed countless tragedies among her kin, and she seems to have shared a special closeness with Princess Ōku.

Here, let me list some of the sorrowful events that shaped both Princess Ōku and Empress Genmei (then known as Princess Abe):

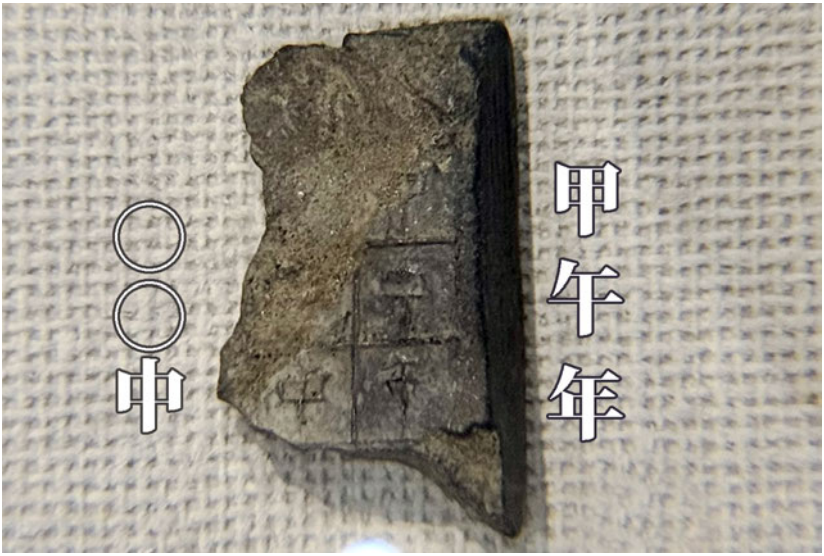
The Isshi Incident (Taika Reform)
The rebellion of their grandfather, Soga no Ishikawamaro
The suicide of Ōchi no Iratsume (mother of Princess Ōku,



Replica of the Origin Story of Yakushiji
(Natsumi Temple Site Museum)

aunt of Princess Abe)
Defeat at Baekgang (Hakusukinoe)
The transfer of the capital to Ōmi
The Jinshin War
The untimely death of Princess Tōchi
The death of Emperor Tenmu
The rebellion and execution of their cousin, Prince Ōtsu
The dismissal of Princess Ōku as Saiō
The death of Prince Kusakabe, consort of Princess Abe (Empress Genmei)

All of these events were entangled with the Soga-Ishikawamaro lineage, weaving a web of tragedy in which they were alternately perpetrators and victims.



Molded Buddha plaque from Natsumi Temple
bearing the inscription "Year of Kōgo (694)"

Empress Genmei herself died on December 29, 721. Yet I sense that before her death, she entrusted the temple project to her daughter, Princess Hidaka (Empress Genshō, the 44th sovereign).

As an aside, Empress Genmei was the only emperor in Japanese history to forbid the building of a mausoleum or the performance of funeral rites for herself. Her daughter, Empress Genshō, to whom she ceded the throne, is remembered as a reigning empress who never married.

It may well be that the founding of Shōfuku-ji was the work of three women bound to Amaterasu Ōmikami: Princess Ōku, Empress Genmei (the 43rd sovereign), and Empress Genshō (the 44th).

Most notably, Princess Ōku had been chosen as Saiō, the one appointed to serve Amaterasu herself—the highest-ranking

Molded Buddha plaque excavated at Sekkō-ji (appears to have been made from the same mold as those at Natsumi Temple)

priestess of the sun goddess. From the age of twelve to twenty-five, she had lived as the Saiō of Ise. And yet, she made a vow to build a Buddhist temple for the repose of Emperor Tenmu.

Of course, the age was one of **shinbutsu shūgō**, the blending of kami and buddhas. The question of which—Shintō or Buddhism—was more effective for the protection of the state was fluid, and the boundaries between the two were indistinct.

But Princess Ōku sought salvation not in the binding institution of "Amaterasu," but in the teachings of Buddhism. This is not to say that Buddhism was inherently superior; rather, it was the path she chose.

So what influence did Buddhist thought have upon Princess Ōku, dismissed from her office as Saiō?

To explore this, we must step back in time and consider the role and culture of shrine maidens (miko) before the introduction of Buddhism.

This may offer us a glimpse into the hearts of Princess Ōku and the women who, like her, served as priestesses.

5. The Age of the Shrine Maidens

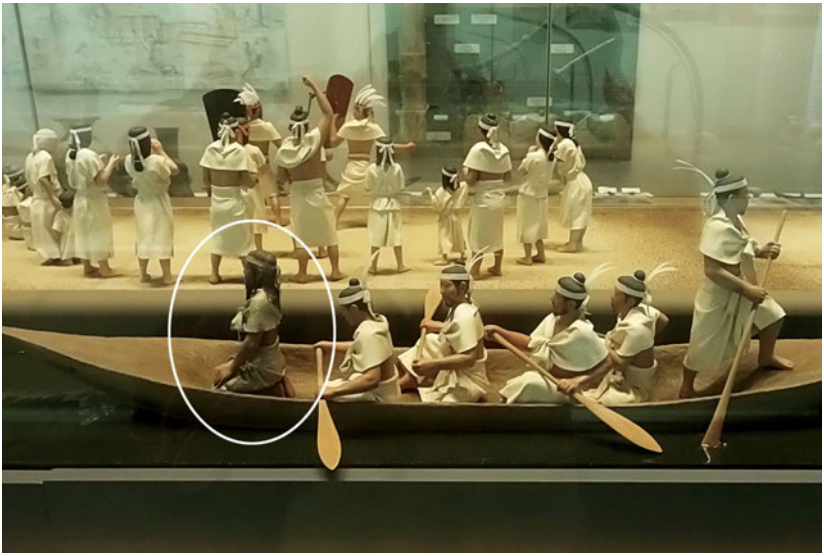
In the early Kofun period, it was common to find burial mounds with two stone chambers. In many cases, one chamber has yielded human remains with numerous shell bracelets—made from cowrie or conch shells—worn on the right arm. These bracelets were ornaments typically worn by women, but to be adorned with so many from childhood signified that the individual had been a female priestess exempt from ordinary labor.

In the other chamber was usually buried a male ruler, a military leader. In other words, a single tumulus enshrined both a queen who presided over religious rites and a king who commanded in war. In later Kofun, it became more common for a husband and wife to share a chamber, but in this earlier period the pairs were often siblings—brother and sister.

Royal women and shrine maidens with shell bracelets on their right arms
(Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute Museum)

This system, in which a queen and king were paired in ritual and governance, is sometimes called the **himehiko-sei** ("princess-and-prince system"). The women enshrined in such tombs were, in effect, shrine maidens, though they held the rank of queen among them. Beneath them, of course, were other shrine maidens serving in lesser roles. Let us now turn to what is known about these women.

There is said to be a condition called **miko-yami**—literally, "the illness of shrine maidens." It is a psychological disorder most common in adolescent girls, still reported in Okinawa. It resembles schizophrenia: hearing divine voices, experiencing shifts in personality, or undergoing what is colloquially called spirit possession. In Okinawa, however, those who overcome this state are said to become respected **noro**, priestesses.



Shrine maiden praying for safe voyage from the prow of a ship
(Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute Museum)

At first I wondered why "mental illness" and "Okinawa" should be linked. But as I studied, I began to glimpse an answer: the high prevalence of such disorders in Okinawa seems tied to the deep connection between "religion" and "mental illness." In other words, the religious culture of Okinawa has produced a significant number of spiritually sensitive women—women of a shrine-maiden type.

Thus the large number of spiritually attuned individuals and the relatively high number of those labeled mentally ill appear to go hand in hand, reflecting Okinawa's spiritual environment. Until the Okinawa Ocean Expo was held, such women were not segregated or treated as "abnormal." They lived within their communities, and many recovered naturally.

But with the decision to hold the Expo and the visit of

Bird-clad Shaman (Karako-Kagi Archaeological Museum)

the Crown Prince, circumstances changed. Those mentally unstable women who had lived in small village communities were suddenly deemed "unsuitable" and were forcibly admitted to psychiatric hospitals. Existing institutions were insufficient, and many new ones had to be established.

Why do I bring this up? Because I believe the same thing was happening in ancient times. In that age, people were even more sensitive to gods and spirits. Women, to a greater or lesser degree, fulfilled shrine-maiden roles within the small communities of family and village.

Among them were some who were especially spiritually sensitive. These women often experienced symptoms of what we now call **miko-yami** in adolescence. Those who overcame it were accepted and elevated as shrine maidens, serving the wider tribe. Those who could not were regarded as insane, yet even so, they were still cared for and sustained within the community.

So then, what role did shrine maidens play within the larger collectives of village, tribe, and eventually the state?

1. Guiding the Dead to the Gods

In ancient Japan, "gods" originally referred to the forces of nature—an animistic faith. But as more immigrant peoples arrived, the worship of ancestors as deities became common.

When immigrant groups became the core of village life, the dead began to be buried on the outskirts of the settlement. Before that, burials took place in the central square of the village. Excavations suggest that the Jōmon people lived with the dead at the center of their community, perhaps with the belief that ancestors would protect them. Out of this developed the idea of ancestral deities, which evolved into **ujigami**, the tutelary gods of each clan, guardians of the community.

Pit graves from the early Jomon period
(Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute Museum)

In Okinawa, there is a saying: **"When a family line continues for seven generations, a god will inevitably be born and worshiped."** It was believed that ancestral spirits gradually evolved into gods through long years and complex rituals. But this transformation did not occur automatically with time; it required someone to guide the soul into divinity. Performing such rites was one of the shrine maiden's tasks.

When a clan member died, the shrine maiden also helped deliver the soul into the presence of the ancestral gods. Left unattended, a spirit might remain a wandering ghost. Thus the miko would declare something like: **"This person, who died on such-and-such a date, is your descendant of so many generations. Please accept them into your care."** To ensure recognition, a family emblem was attached to the spirit. The making of these emblems was also the shrine maiden's duty. Over time, these emblems evolved into what we know as family crests (**kamon**).

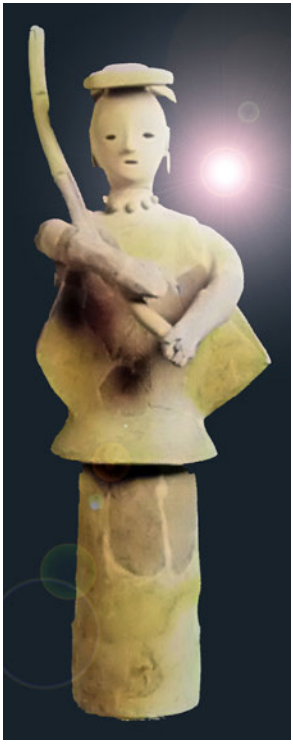
2. Hearing the Oracles of the Gods

One of the queen-shaman's most important duties was to call down the gods of Takamagahara to earth and receive their oracles. Two main methods were said to be used.

In one, the shrine maiden draped herself with a sash of **hage-no-kazura** (a climbing vine), placed sprigs of **tsurumazaki** in her hair, and held bamboo leaves in her hand. Standing on an overturned tub, she stamped and leapt upon it until she entered a state of divine possession.

The other method involved choosing an auspicious day and entering a consecrated chamber. There, a small hand-held koto was played—sometimes bells or the **azusa** bow were used instead. A diviner (**sanewa**), trained to interpret oracles, was present. The oracle was delivered in a chant, often in poetic verse, and expressed in a question-and-answer form. This sung form of oracle would later evolve into the tradition of **waka** poetry.

In simpler terms: the first method used ecstatic dance to enter trance; the second used ritual music and divination to hear the gods' words.



shrine maiden holding a bow for fortune telling

3. The Miko as Prophet

The most critical role of the shrine maiden was prophecy. She foretold matters of weather, war, hunting, disease, and sea voyages. The authority of shrine maidens and shaman-queens rested upon this role. To fulfill it, they chanted incantations or entered trance states.

Prophecies too were often sung in verse, so composing in chant-like forms became part of a shrine maiden's training.

4. War and the Shrine Maidens

Shrine maidens did not merely divine the outcome of wars—they also took part in them.

Among the ancient clans, the **Mononobe**, who oversaw ritual matters, were also a military family—the word **Mononobe** itself later becoming associated with **mononofu** (warriors). Within this clan there was a group of maidens called the "Eighty Maidens." The number "eighty" did not denote an exact count, but rather "a great many."

In battle, these maidens stood behind the soldiers, praying for victory. They would blow their breath toward the enemy—"fū, fū"—as a form of curse, while also lifting the spirits of their own side.

5. Agriculture and the Shrine Maidens

Since rice yields equaled national power, agriculture was the foundation of the state. Irrigation ponds were built, and rituals were performed to propitiate the gods of grain and weather: Hirose for water, Tatsuta for wind, Niu for rain. When these deities became violent, people sought to pacify them through magical rites, even human sacrifice on occasion.

Shrine maidens, including shaman-queens, naturally took part in these rituals. It is even thought that shrine maidens themselves may sometimes have been chosen as sacrificial victims, though no direct evidence—archaeological, folkloric, or textual—confirms this.

Clay haniwa figures of a king and a shrine maiden
(Gunma Prefectural Museum of History)

6. The Miko as Healer

As with the example of Queen Himiko, early Daoism included healing practices through confession, used by Zhang Jue, founder of the Taiping Dao, to gather followers and spark the Yellow Turban Rebellion. Though suppressed, that uprising plunged China into chaos, leading to the Three Kingdoms. Among the resulting refugees, some came to Japan.

Around the same time, Japan—divided into many warring states—was unified under Queen Himiko of Yamatai. This has led some to suggest that Himiko's lineage were immigrants from China, who gained power through irrigation, metallurgy, and healing practices.

Even before such practices arrived, however, shamanic healing was already known in Japan. The word **kusuru** ("medicine") comes from **kusuru**, meaning "to curse"—hinting at its origins in magical rites.

Miko healers sometimes treated illness only with prayer and incantation. Others combined prayer with substances given as medicine. These included offerings made to the gods (**osagari**) or medicinal herbs.

Skeletal remains have even been found with holes drilled into the skull, thought to be ritual trepanations performed by shrine maidens to cure spirit-related illnesses.

7. The Miko as Tax Collector

The character for "tax" (税) is said to come from "禾" (rice plant) and " 兌 " (a crowned person). It suggests that shrine maidens, in service to the gods, collected rice from the people as offerings.

In early times, this practice was called iyajiri—a tribute offered to the gods in gratitude and for protection. Only later, as the legal codes of **so-yō-chō** were established, did officials replace shrine maidens in collecting taxes.

Interestingly, the Omoro (sacred songs) of Okinawa preserve echoes of this role. One song includes a line that roughly means, **"Let us heap up the taxes, for the great priestess."** This suggests that shrine maidens themselves once walked the land, collecting tribute.

I often bring in examples from Okinawa, because many ancient customs of mainland Japan survive there in fossilized form.

8. Praying for Safe Voyages

The Records of **Wei on the Wa People** (Gishi Wajinden) describes a role called **jissai** (translated here as "expiator"):

"When the Wa embark on a sea voyage, a **jissai** is chosen. He avoids human contact, does not remove lice, wears soiled

clothing, abstains from women and meat, and lives as though already dead. If the voyage succeeds, he is rewarded; if it fails, he is killed."

In this case, the **jissai** was male, not a shrine maiden. I once assumed this exclusion of women from ships reflected the idea of female "impurity." But that was a later notion. In ancient times, women were often required on long voyages.

While the **jissai** confined himself below deck, absorbing impurity and keeping the ship ritually clean, the shrine maidens prayed for safe passage. But if the voyage failed and the jissai was killed, what became of the shrine maidens? We do not know.

The desire for safe travel is universal. And strikingly, across cultures, it is most often women who are asked to pray for it.

Clay haniwa figures of a group of shrine maidens
(Imashirozuka Kofun, Ibaraki, Osaka Prefecture)

I recall business trips to Nepal years ago. Before I returned to Japan, I was always invited to the home of a Nepalese friend, where his grandmother, acting as a family priestess, prayed for my safe journey. At the end of the ritual, she would mark my forehead with a **red tika**. Though it soon faded, the red trace remained, and I flew home to Japan with that mark on my brow. Within Nepal and even at the airport, this mark brought unexpected kindness from officials and strangers alike.

Shrine maidens and farmers (Katsuragi Archaeological Research Institute Museum)

As Yamatai transformed into the centralized ritsuryō state of the Yamato court, the shrine maidens who had arisen in local traditions were absorbed into the national system.

The ancestral gods of local clans were also incorporated, reclassified as **kunitsukami** (earthly deities) under the centralized authority of Amaterasu Ōmikami, the state deity. This was the birth of state Shintō.

To serve Amaterasu, an imperial princess was chosen as Saiō. Princess Ōku was the first. Yet by then Buddhism had also entered Japan, so the protection of the state came to rest on two pillars—Shintō and Buddhism.

The king and his vassals await the oracle of the shrine maiden
(Yoshinogari Site)

6. Buddhism and the Shrine Maidens

As I mentioned earlier in connection with miko-yami in Okinawa, becoming a shrine maiden often came with serious mental risks. Many women lost their sanity in the process.

In ancient times, shrine maidens bore enormous responsibilities: cursing enemies, divining the fate of the nation, healing the sick, praying for rain and abundant harvests, pacifying vengeful spirits, and ensuring the prosperity of the state. Every one of these roles carried heavy psychological burdens, and failure could mean death. It was an extremely risky life. There were no guarantees, and if a woman broke down mentally, she was discarded. To rise as a leading shrine maiden or be cast aside—this was the harsh world they inhabited.

In the era of folk belief, local communities cared for women who entered states of possession. But once state Shintō emerged, such women were treated as expendable. Who would look after those shrine maidens whose minds had collapsed?

It was Buddhism that reached out to them. Later generations would call Buddhism "prohibited to women," but in the early days, when the religion first arrived in Japan, it was women who risked their lives to spread it. Men, preoccupied with politics and state protection, treated Buddhism as a tool. Women, by contrast, embraced it on a spiritual level.

Do you know of Zenshin-ni?

She was the daughter of Soga no Shiba Tatsu, a naturalized immigrant from the continent, and in the late 6th century, at the age of eleven, she became Japan's first Buddhist nun.

This was the age when the pro-Buddhist Soga clan and the anti-Buddhist Mononobe clan clashed, eventually leading to the full-scale "war of gods and buddhas." As a warning to the pro-Buddhist faction, the Mononobe captured the eleven-year-old Zenshin-ni, along with two other girls, Keizen-ni and Zenzō-ni, who had also taken vows. The three were stripped half-naked and flogged at the station house of Tsubaichi.

But rather than crushing their faith, the punishment only inflamed it. Their passion grew, and ultimately they crossed the sea to Baekje in search of the Dharma. This was in 588 CE, when Zenshin-ni was just fifteen years old—ten years before Japan sent its first official mission to Sui China.

Why women? Because at the time, the Japanese understood **hotoke**—the Buddha—as a foreign "god." And it was the role of women, the shrine maidens, to serve the gods and convey their words.

Yet when these women encountered Buddhism, they discovered something wholly absent from Japan's native deities: the idea of salvation. Shrine maidens who had been used up in the service of the state and its gods now found hope in a teaching that promised, **"Even women can be saved," t**hat they too could be reborn into the Pure Land.

Let us return to Princess Ōku.

As Japan's first Saiō, she had served Amaterasu Ōmikami. But when her younger brother, Prince Ōtsu, was executed under false charges of rebellion, she herself was dismissed from office. Having tasted impermanence to its bitter depths, she turned to Buddhism as the refuge of her heart.

For the anguish of her brother's wrongful death, for the suffering of her stepmother who condemned him, and for her own torment—Princess Ōku needed the salvation offered by **hotoke**. This was the very same reason that Princess Chūjō would later enter the Buddhist path.

It was not only Princess Ōku. Many shrine maidens found their answer in Buddhism. In lives that consumed their hearts with ceaseless ritual, they encountered a new idea: that the

Natsumi Temple (Shōfuku-ji / Nabari, Mie Prefecture)

heart itself could be saved.

Just as Buddhist sculptors carved statues of the Buddha, so too did shrine maidens—becoming nuns, or weaving maidens—depict the Pure Land in embroidery. It is said that the first Buddhist image produced in Asuka Japan was not a sculpture but an embroidered Buddha (**shūbutsu**).

The story of Princess Chūjō weaving the Taimadera Mandala from lotus threads in a single day is legendary. In reality, it was likely a **tsuzure-ori** brocade, a work of embroidery employing every known technique, spun not by one girl in a day but by many experienced women over many days.

Behind the legend of Princess Chūjō lies the shadow of Princess Ōku's tragedy. And not hers alone, but the heartfelt prayers of countless shrine maidens seem to be woven into it.

With the arrival of Buddhism, the shrine maidens—who had strained their hearts with curses, prayers, and ritual in service to the clans and the state—found in nunhood a path of relief. In seeking salvation for their own hearts, they transformed into Buddhist nuns.

Replica of the Taimadera Mandala (Taimadera) — 4m × 4m

Conclusion — On Empress Genmei

Near Taimadera in Nara stands an ancient temple called Sekkō-ji. Within its grounds there remains a well known as "Princess Chūjō's Dyeing Well," said to have supplied the water in which lotus threads were dyed.

If Taimadera was the place where Princess Chūjō pursued the Buddhist path, then Sekkō-ji might be called the atelier where the **Taimadera Mandala** was created.

Something remarkable was discovered there.

In 1991 (Heisei 3), during excavations carried out for the rebuilding of Sekkō-ji's Maitreya Hall, archaeologists uncovered a late Asuka (Hakuhō)-period stone image of Maitreya (now a Nara Prefecture Tangible Cultural Property), along with roof tiles and molded Buddha plaques.

Kawakami Kunihiko of the Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute reported in the preliminary bulletin:

"We cannot definitively say that the Maitreya Hall was built as a memorial hall for Prince Ōtsu, yet the finds support this hypothesis. Two types of **senbutsu** (molded Buddha plaques) are from the same molds as those from the Natsumi temple ruins in Nabari, Mie Prefecture. Identical **senbutsu** are often found dispersed across many temples; however, Natsumi Haiji was neither a central state temple nor a large complex. It is difficult

to imagine that a temple within the Yamato Basin would have the same Buddhas as Natsumi. Moreover, the Natsumi examples are superior in variety and casting, suggesting Natsumi came first. Considering that both documents and excavations strongly indicate Natsumi Haiji to be Shōfuku-ji, founded on the vow of Princess Ōku (Ōku no Himemiko), the discovery of identical Buddhas at Natsumi and at Sekkō-ji is suggestive. In other words, it becomes easier to suppose that Princess Ōku established, within Sekkō-ji—long associated with the imperial family—a memorial hall for Prince Ōtsu."

(Here, "Natsumi Haiji" refers to the temple ruins believed to be Shōfuku-ji, which, according to one view, Princess Ōku founded to pray for the repose of Prince Ōtsu.)

Sekkō-ji's founding is estimated around Tenmu 9 (680 CE), and the construction of the Maitreya Hall within its precincts around Jitō 8 (694 CE), eight years after Prince Ōtsu's execution.

Fragments of what may be Japan's oldest stone Maitreya statue were excavated at Sekkō-ji—closely linked to Princess Chūjō. The hall that housed it is said to have been erected by Princess Ōku as a memorial for her brother. Taimadera, also associated with Princess Chūjō, is likewise thought to have been established in the same period, and the Maitreya enshrined there closely resembles the stone Maitreya unearthed at Sekkō-ji.

As for the National Treasure **Taimadera Mandala**, which legend says Princess Chūjō wove alone from lotus fibers in a single day: the textile in question appears to be a **tsuzure-**

ori (tapestry brocade) in a technique not then practiced in Japan, making it highly likely to be an import from Tang China. Considering the connection between Sekkō-ji and Princess Ōku, I once imagined that the mandala might have been woven by Princess Ōku together with many women who had left their roles as shrine maidens to become nuns. That possibility, however, now seems slim.

So who placed the **Taimadera Mandala** at Taimadera, and when? In that era, who possessed the capacity to transport and donate a tapestry mandala roughly four meters square from Tang China to Japan? And why to Taimadera?

—The period is likely the late Hakuhō to early Nara. If we think in terms of offerings for memorial purposes to Taimadera and Sekkō-ji, then, given the circumstances, they may have been intended to honor Emperor Tenmu, with a parallel intention to console the spirit of Prince Ōtsu. But even as a member of the imperial family, Princess Ōku—sister of a man condemned as a traitor—probably did not have the necessary power.

As my thoughts turn over these questions, a figure emerges: the woman I mentioned in "4. Princess Ōku After Leaving Her Post as Saiō"—Princess Ōku's cousin, Empress Genmei (the 43rd sovereign), and the 44th sovereign, Empress Genshō, who carried on her will. From the Taika Reform onward, together with Princess Ōku, they were women who endured and overcame struggles for clan power.

For now, it remains my conjecture alone. Yet in the background of the Princess Chūjō legend, I cannot help but see the overlapping images of Princess Ōku and the shrine maidens, struggling to free themselves from the binding spell of Amaterasu Ōmikami—and of Empress Genmei herself.

Let me close by repeating a singular fact: Empress Genmei is the only emperor in Japanese history who, at the time of her death, forbade the building of a mausoleum and prohibited all funeral rites, including **mogari** (lying-in-state).

Sekkoji Temple Miroku Hall (Katsuragi, Nara Prefecture)

Chapter 4

Prince Kusakabe and the Jinshin Rebellion

Introduction

In this essay, I would like to focus on Prince Kusakabe.

Yet, everything about him—from his birth to his death—remains shrouded in mystery.

Hardly any concrete clues survive that might help us unravel his life.

To speak of him, therefore, is to say, **I think this may be so, or perhaps it was like this.**

What follows is an attempt to piece together a portrait of Prince Kusakabe, relying on the few faint traces that remain and filling the gaps with reasoned imagination.

I ask for the reader's understanding as you accompany me through this exploration.

1. The Birth of Prince Kusakabe

It is generally said that Prince Kusakabe was born in the first year of Emperor Tenchi's reign (662 CE) as the second son of Prince Ōama, later Emperor Tenmu.

However, in 662 CE Prince Ōama was in Kyushu—at the frontline base in Fukuoka—together with his elder brother, Prince Naka no Ōe (later Emperor Tenchi), leading the expedition to rescue the fallen kingdom of Baekje.

At that time, the Korean Peninsula stood at the close of its Three Kingdoms period—Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje.

The Tang Empire, which had overthrown the Sui, sought to subdue Goguryeo, while Silla aimed to destroy Baekje and unify the peninsula.

Thus, the Tang–Silla alliance was formed, and backed by Tang's overwhelming power, Silla launched its assault upon Baekje.

Responding to Baekje's plea for help, Empress Saimei decided to send troops.

She herself, accompanied by her sons—Prince Naka no Ōe and Prince Ōama—led an army of some 27,000 men to Fukuoka.

Prince Ōama was joined by his principal consort, Princess Ōta.

It is said that while en route, at Ōhako in Bizen Province (around present-day Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture), Princess Ōta gave birth to their daughter, Princess Ōku, on February

12, 661 (1st month 8th day of Saimei 7).

The following year, in 663 (2nd year of Tenchi), while stationed at Natsuno-Ōtsu—modern-day Natsu in Fukuoka Prefecture—Princess Ōta gave birth to a son who was named Prince Ōtsu after that place.

It is said that the year before, in 662, Prince Kusakabe had already been born.

His mother, Princess Unonosarara (hereafter referred to simply as Princess Uno), was Princess Ōta's younger sister; both sisters were married to Prince Ōama.

Yet Princess Uno seems not to have accompanied him to the Kyushu front.

There is no record—not even a passing mention—of her presence in Fukuoka, nor of any childbirth there.

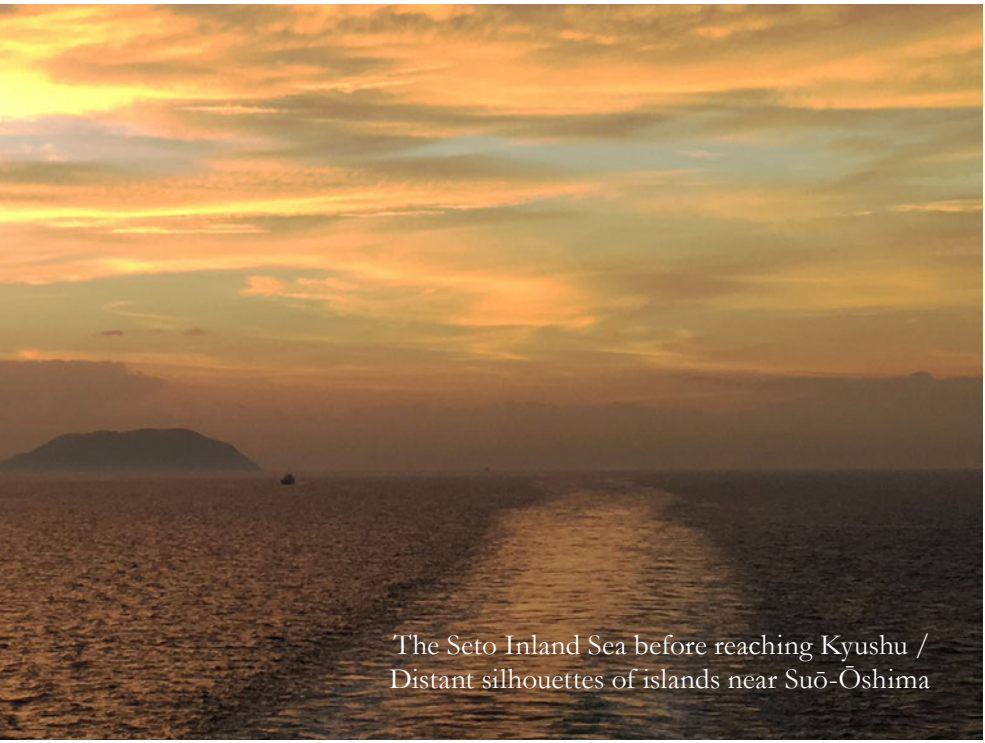
In contrast, the births of both Princess Ōku and Prince Ōtsu are clearly recounted, each with its setting and circumstances along the expedition route.

But for Prince Kusakabe there is complete silence—not only about his birth, but about his mother's whereabouts at that time.

From this, one can only conclude that Princess Uno remained behind in Asuka, serving as the guardian of the royal residence.

In other words, it seems impossible that Prince Kusakabe could have been born in 662.

When, then, was he actually born ?



The Seto Inland Sea before reaching Kyushu /
Distant silhouettes of islands near Suō-Ōshima

2.From the Defeat at Baekgang to the Move to Ōmi

Let us turn back the clock for a moment.

It is said that on January 6, 661, Empress Saimei and her court set sail from Naniwa Port to aid Baekje.

The following poem, composed by Nukata no Ōkimi—the beloved of Prince Naka no Ōe, who accompanied him on this campaign—was written on January 14, while their fleet waited for the tide at Nikitatsu (present-day Dōgo Hot Spring in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture):

At Nikitatsu we wait for the moon
To embark upon our voyage—
Now the tide has turned,
Let us row forth.

On February 12 of that same year, at Ōhako Bay in Bizen Province (around modern Ushimado in Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture), Princess Ōta gave birth to Princess Ōku.

It seems the party stayed there for a while so that she could recuperate.

By March 25, they had reached Natsuno-Ōtsu (today's Natsu in Fukuoka Prefecture), and by May had moved to

the provisional palace of Asakura Tachibana no Hiro-niwa, preparing for the campaign to restore Baekje.

Perhaps due to the rigors of the journey, Empress Saimei passed away on August 24—three months later—before the battle at Baekgang even took place. She died with full confidence that victory was near.

Crown Prince Naka no Ōe went into mourning.

Her remains were brought back to Naniwa Port on October 23 of that year and laid in temporary repose on the riverbank at Asuka on November 7.

Thus the year 661 came to a hurried close.

When the new year of 662 dawned, Crown Prince Naka no Ōe still did not ascend the throne.

Instead, he continued to direct operations from the front as commander-in-chief of the Baekje restoration army.

It is said that Prince Kusakabe was born in this year.

Yet, as noted in the previous section, Princess Ōta, Prince Ōama's principal wife, had accompanied him to Fukuoka, while Princess Uno—the supposed mother of Kusakabe—appears nowhere in the records.

It seems unlikely that she was present at the Kyushu front.

Therefore, the birth year of 662 may well have been retroactively assigned later, when Prince Kusakabe was made crown prince under Emperor Tenmu.

Then came the defeat at the Battle of Baekgang in October 663.

Baekje was utterly destroyed, and there arose the real fear

that the Tang–Silla allied forces might invade the Japanese homeland next.

To prepare for this, Crown Prince Naka no Ōe ordered the rapid construction of defensive fortifications—Mizuki, Ōnojō, and Kii Castle among them—and remained in Dazaifu to oversee their reinforcement.

Assisting his brother in stabilizing Kyushu's defenses, Prince Ōama likely returned to Asuka only after the situation had settled, probably in early 664.

It had become customary for a new emperor to establish a new capital upon accession, and thus the transfer of the capital to Ōmi was a natural step.

Still, moving to Shiga—deep inland—seems to have been a precaution against possible invasion from Tang and Silla.

Construction of the new capital proceeded at remarkable speed, and by April 667 the move was completed.

In February of the following year, 668, Prince Naka no Ōe ascended the throne as Emperor Tenchi.

Returning now to our main subject:

Prince Kusakabe was likely born not in 662 but sometime between Prince Ōama's return to Asuka in 664 and the subsequent transfer of the capital.

At the earliest, his birth would have been in the autumn of 664—making him not one year older but rather one year younger than Prince Ōtsu.

At that stage, such a difference in age probably carried

little significance.

Yet it would later become a matter of consequence—when Prince Ōama ascended as Emperor Tenmu and named Kusakabe his crown prince, and even more so after Emperor Tenmu's death—forcing later compilers of the "*Nihon Shoki*" to revise the chronology to preserve imperial legitimacy.

Kengoshizuka Kofun — said to be the burial site of Empress Saimei
(Asuka Village, Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture)

3. The Jinshin Rebellion

When Emperor Tenchi ascended the throne, Prince Ōama was named Crown Prince (more precisely, Crown Younger Brother).

At that point, there should have been no doubt that the next emperor would be Prince Ōama.

However, the presence of Emperor Tenchi's son, Prince Ōtomo, cast a long shadow over this succession.

In those days, emperors customarily had multiple wives in order to ensure the continuity of the imperial line.

The structure was even codified in the early ritsuryō system.

It defined the ranks of imperial consorts as follows:

1.Kōgō (Empress) – the principal wife of the emperor; in principle, there was only one.

2.Hi (Consort) – up to two, chosen from imperial princesses of the fourth rank (shihon) or higher.

3.Bunin (Lady) – up to three, chosen from the daughters of ministers or nobles of the third rank.

4.Hin (Concubine) – up to four, chosen from the daughters of nobles of the fourth rank or above.

In addition to these, during the Asuka period, there was a practice in which provincial chieftains offered their daughters

to the court as **uneme** (court attendants).

Prince Ōtomo's mother, Iga no Uneme Yakako no Iratsume, was one such **uneme**—a woman of provincial noble birth rather than of imperial lineage.

This meant that her son Ōtomo, though the emperor's child, stood far down the line of succession and could not rightfully inherit the throne unless extraordinary circumstances arose.

Emperor Tenchi ascended in January 668, likely in his early forties.

Until then, he seems to have been a man guided more by reason than by emotion.

Yet once enthroned—and as the domestic and international situations around Japan temporarily stabilized—he appears to have relaxed his vigilance and grown more sentimental

Site of the Ōmi Ōtsu Palace at Nishikori (Ōtsu City, Shiga Prefecture)

toward his own kin.

Three years later, on December 3, 671, Emperor Tenchi passed away.

The previous year, he had created the post of **Daijō Daijin** (Chancellor of the Realm)—the first in history—and appointed his son Ōtomo to that position.

In 671, when he fell gravely ill, he summoned Prince Ōama to his bedside and entrusted him with the affairs of state.

However, according to tradition, a plot to assassinate Prince Ōama had already taken shape.

Sensing the danger, Prince Ōama renounced his position as Crown Prince on the spot, took Buddhist vows, and fled to the mountains of Yoshino.

To the courtiers and powerful clans surrounding the throne, the rightful successor was clearly Prince Ōama.

It seemed unnatural that Ōtomo—whose mother was not of imperial blood—should ascend instead.

This perception, more significant than modern readers may imagine, explains why, after Emperor Tenchi's death, when Prince Ōama raised troops, few regarded it as rebellion.

Rather, it was seen as an inevitable correction of order.

Supporters rallied not only from provincial clans but even from within the court at Ōtsu itself.

When Prince Ōama left Yoshino and began his march eastward, his party numbered fewer than a hundred.

Yet in a matter of days, it swelled into an army of tens of

The estimated site of Omi-Otsu Palace

thousands—proof of how widespread the sympathy for his cause was.

There is no need here to recount the detailed course of the Jinshin Rebellion.

Suffice it to say that it ended in Prince Ōama's overwhelming victory.

He ascended the throne as Emperor Tenmu and carried out sweeping reforms—centralizing power around the emperor in continuation of the Taika Reforms.

In doing so, Emperor Tenmu relied not so much on senior courtiers or powerful nobles, but on his own family: his empress, Uno no Sarara (later Empress Jitō), and their sons—Prince Takachi, Prince Ōtsu, and Prince Kusakabe.

Yet this very reliance on blood ties would, in time, become the seed of the next tragedy.

4. The Four Children of Emperor Tenmu

The Jinshin Rebellion lasted less than a month—from July 24 to August 21, 672 CE.

Its course, in brief, unfolded as follows:

July 24: Prince Ōama escaped from Yoshino.

July 31: His forces entered Mino Province, gathered troops from the eastern regions, and split into two armies—one directed toward Yamato (the old capital of Asuka), the other toward Ōmi.

That same day, Ōmi's forces also marched out toward Fuwa.

August 8: The first battle was fought at Yokokawa in Omi's Osagano region. Prince Ōama's troops won successive victories thereafter, including the Battle of Hashiraka (near the Hashihaka Kofun), pressing their advance.

August 20: The Ōmi court army suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Seta Bridge.

August 21: Prince Ōtomo took his own life by hanging at the age of twenty-four, and the rebellion came to an end.

At the time of the rebellion's conclusion, Emperor Tenmu's principal children were still very young.

Princess Tōchi, who had become the wife of Prince Ōtomo,

was about nineteen to twenty-four years old.

Prince Ōtsu was nine, his elder sister Princess Ōku was eleven, and Prince Kusakabe perhaps eight.

The eldest among them, Prince Takachi, was eighteen and distinguished himself in battle during the rebellion.

Princess Tōchi is remembered as Prince Ōtomo's consort on the Ōmi side, but as for the younger ones—Ōtsu, Ōku, and Kusakabe—no records exist.

We know neither where they were sheltered during the conflict nor whether they accompanied the campaigns at all.

Here I must indulge in speculation.

When Prince Takachi fled from the capital at Ōtsu, might he have taken these three young children with him?

If so, once they were safely out, and with no time to lose

Area around Yoshigaike and Chimataike Ponds — identified with Ashiike, the site of the Battle for Asuka during the Jinshin Rebellion (Kashiba City, Nara Prefecture)

before joining his father's army, he may have hidden the children somewhere secure—perhaps in the old capital of Asuka.

In Asuka stood Yamada-dera, a temple originally commissioned by Soga no Kurayamada Ishikawa no Maro.

Construction had been halted when its founder was forced to commit suicide under charges of treason, but the project was later resumed during Emperor Tenchi's reign.

I sense that this resumption was closely connected with Princess Uno, Prince Kusakabe's mother.

It may be that Prince Takachi hid the three children at Yamada-dera and entrusted the defense of Asuka to Ōtomo no Fukei, a general loyal to Prince Ōama.

As a result, Asuka was captured with little resistance—almost effortlessly.

However, the Ōmi forces, determined to retake the old capital, sent a massive army from Naniwa.

They vastly outnumbered Ōtomo no Fukei's troops and soon overwhelmed them.

Learning of this, Prince Ōama divided his forces: one to continue the advance toward Ōmi, and another to join Fukei's army to repel the enemy approaching Asuka from Naniwa.

The decisive battle over Asuka was fought at Ashiike—perhaps the present-day Yoshigaike Pond in Kashiba City.

The conscripted Ōmi soldiers were poorly motivated, and once again, Ōtomo no Fukei's troops, fighting under Prince Ōama's banner, won a sweeping victory.

Thus, Asuka was spared the ravages of war.

Yet behind these struggles for the old capital, one cannot help but sense the hidden presence of Prince Ōama's three young children.

These were the children who survived the Jinshin Rebellion:

Prince Takachi (eighteen), who protected and concealed them; Princess Ōku (eleven); Prince Ōtsu (nine); and Prince Kusakabe (eight).

It is not difficult to imagine the deep bond of unity that grew among the four of them through those perilous days.

And it was these four—bound by that shared experience—who would go on to support Emperor Tenmu's new order as the princes and princesses of the restored imperial line.

Yet they were also the ones who, after his death, became the sacrifices demanded to preserve that very system.

Ōsaka area — believed to have been the encampment of Ōtomo no Fukei's forces (Kashiba City, Nara Prefecture)

Ruins of Yamada-dera Temple, associated with
Soga no Kurayamada Ishikawa no Maro
(Asuka Village, Takaichi District, Nara Prefecture)

Chapter 5

The Amaterasu Myth and Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

Introduction

This series of notes on Amaterasu Ōmikami has now reached its final chapter.

From this point on, the discussion takes on a slightly different tone from the arguments I have presented so far, which were based on historical records and archaeological findings.

Within myself, however, there remains a single image that has steadily taken shape—an image that has emerged only after years of tracing this period and the people who lived through it.

It is not something that can be proven.

It is, rather, a personal reflection, guided by intuition and imagination.

In that sense, what follows may fairly be called speculation.

Even so, it is the story that I myself find most convincing after a long period of study and contemplation.

I would like to make that clear at the outset.

1. The Reigns of Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō, and the System Centered on Amaterasu

When we look back on the political reforms of **Emperor Tenmu** and those of **Empress Jitō**, who inherited his intentions, a consistent direction becomes apparent.

That direction was the gradual consolidation of military power, economic strength, and religious authority—previously held by individual clans—into the hands of the emperor.

This trajectory itself was an extension of the policies pursued by **Emperor Tenji** since the Taika Reforms.

Kagami-tsukuri Shrine Shrine enshrining the casting mold said to have been used for Amaterasu's sacred mirror

However, Emperor Tenji did not succeed in fixing imperial succession firmly along a direct lineage, and that unresolved tension ultimately erupted as the Jinshin War.

Ironically, it was Tenji's younger brother, Emperor Tenmu, who finally completed a system of direct imperial succession.

During the reigns of Tenmu and Jitō, a decisive new element was introduced—one that had not existed before.

This was the systematization of the gods with Amaterasu Ōmikami placed at their apex: in other words, the centralization of the divine order.

Originally, Amaterasu appears to have been deeply connected to forms of worship practiced primarily among maritime peoples.

Amano-Iwato Shrine A shrine dedicated to the Heavenly Rock Cave, where Amaterasu is said to have hidden herself.

By elevating this deity to the status of a state god and by introducing the concept of a heavenly realm, a new narrative was constructed: the descendants of Amaterasu descend from the heavens and rule the earthly world.

This is what we know as the myth of the Heavenly Descent.

The earlier image of a god arriving horizontally from beyond the eastern sea was transformed into a vertical movement—from the heavens down to the land below.

Through this myth, a new logic was established: the emperor was the direct descendant of Amaterasu, the supreme deity of the world.

The gods of local clans were integrated beneath Amaterasu, and imperial succession was likewise restricted to those of that divine lineage.

Amano-Manai Well A sacred spring where Amaterasu is said to have washed the Ten-span Sword.

2. Ise Grand Shrine, the Saigū System, and Fujiwara Palace

In order to unify and govern the country, it was necessary to implement measures to control powerful clans, establish an agrarian-based economy, and resolve issues of imperial succession.

For this purpose, Amaterasu had to be positioned unmistakably as the supreme deity of Japan.

In my view, the framework of rule centered on Amaterasu was devised by Emperor Tenmu himself, and subsequently elaborated by his consort **Uno no Sarara** (later Empress Jitō), together with Tenmu's sons and daughters.

Amano-Manai Well A sacred spring where Amaterasu is said to have washed the Ten-span Sword.

Once Amaterasu was established as the highest deity, it became essential to disseminate the myth that her descendants descended from the heavens and ruled the land—and that those descendants were the imperial family.

This myth had to permeate every corner of the country.

It was for this purpose that **Ise Grand Shrine** was established.

According to the narrative that developed, it was considered too awe-inspiring to keep the sacred mirror, **Yata no Kagami,** within the imperial palace.

The mirror was therefore taken out, and after searching for its rightful resting place, Ise was chosen.

Next, in order to make it widely known that the imperial family personally worshipped Amaterasu, the Saigū system was created.

An unmarried woman of imperial lineage would serve Amaterasu on behalf of the emperor.

The first to assume this role was **Ōku no Himemiko**, the daughter of Emperor Tenmu and his late consort Princess Ōta, and the elder sister of Prince Ōtsu.

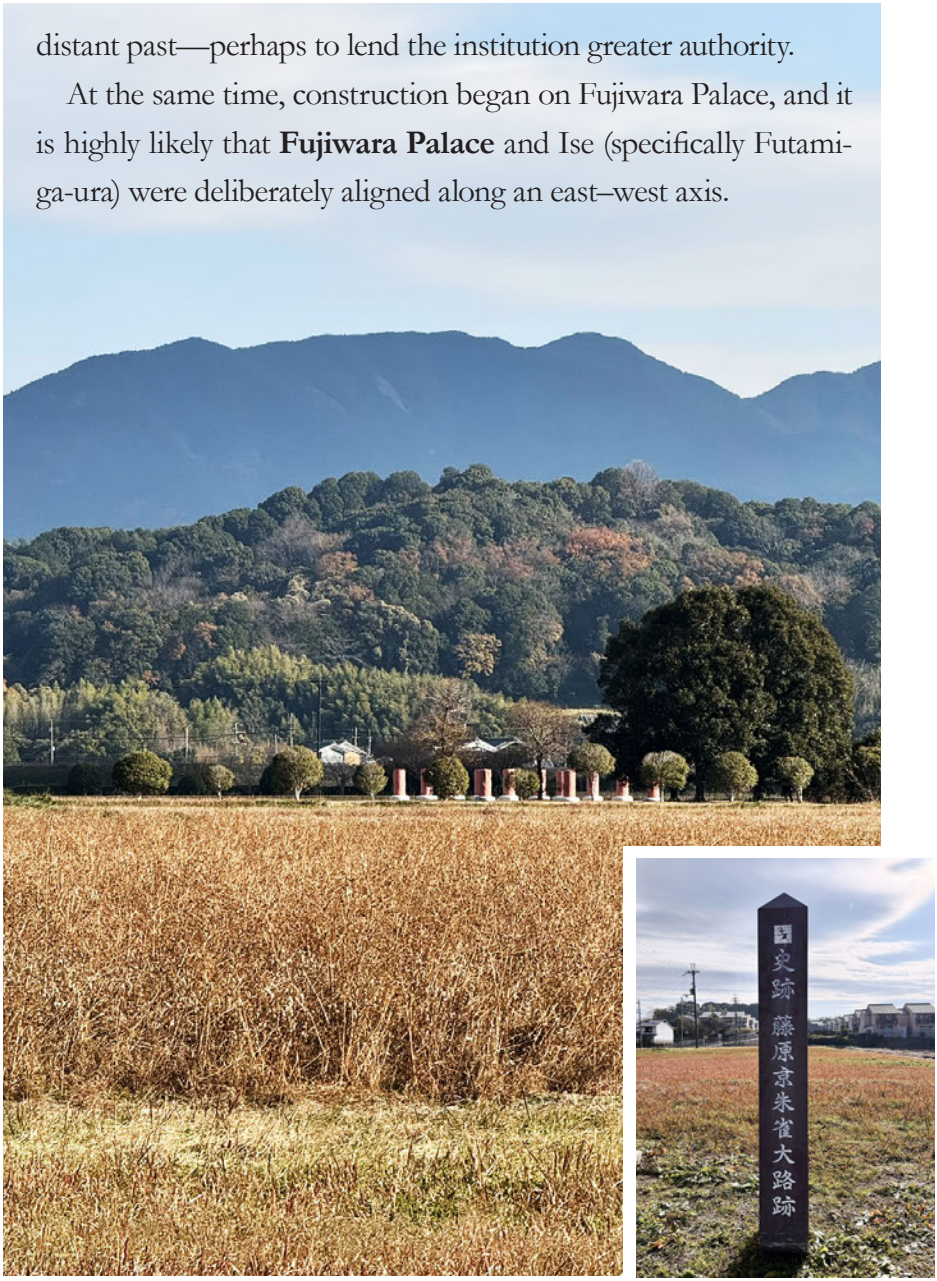
As noted earlier, the Saigū was the institution that served Amaterasu in place of the emperor, and its head was the Saio.

A single unmarried woman was selected through divination using turtle shells and would serve for the duration of one emperor's reign.

Although the establishment of the Saigū and Ise Shrine occurred during Emperor Tenmu's time, later narratives deliberately pushed the origins of Ise much further back into the

distant past—perhaps to lend the institution greater authority.

At the same time, construction began on Fujiwara Palace, and it is highly likely that **Fujiwara Palace** and Ise (specifically Futami-ga-ura) were deliberately aligned along an east–west axis.



Suzaku Avenue of Fujiwara Palace The main ceremonial avenue of Fujiwara Palace, once the heart of the ancient capital.

3. The Spread of the Amaterasu Myth and Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

With the establishment of Ise Shrine, Fujiwara Palace, and the Saigū, a grand framework was now in place.

The next task was to disseminate the myth of the Heavenly Descent throughout the country and to ensure that the emperor was recognized everywhere as the sole legitimate ruler of Yamato.

I believe that the person who played a crucial role in creating and spreading this nation-building myth was **Kakinomoto no Hitomaro,** later revered as a court poet.

The compilation of an official national history became an urgent matter.

This effort would later culminate in the Nihon Shoki, but beforehand, provincial gazetteers (Fudoki) were collected and used as the basis for compiling the Kojiki.

Within the Kojiki, the origins of Amaterasu and the birth of Japan are narrated as myth.

The descent of **Ninigi-no-Mikoto**, entrusted with the earthly realm by Amaterasu, becomes the foundational story legitimizing imperial rule.

At this point, one might object: the Kojiki was orally transmitted by **Hieda no Are** and compiled by **Ō no Yasumaro**—where, then, does Hitomaro appear?

But is that truly the case?

My own conclusion is that the framework of the Amaterasu myth was shaped under Emperor Tenmu's direction by a group consisting of Princess Uno (later Empress Jitō), Tenmu's sons and daughters, and Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, and that it was completed during the reign of **Empress Genmei**, the consort of Prince Kusakabe.

I would go further still: I believe that Hieda no Are was none other than Kakinomoto no Hitomaro himself, and that he participated in the compilation of the Kojiki under Ō no Yasumaro.

The place where this work was carried out, I suspect, was Hieda in Nara—present-day Hieda-chō in Yamatokōriyama City.

Kakimoto Temple Ruins
Ruins believed to mark the Yamato base of the Kakimoto clan.

Uta-zuka Mound
The "Poem Mound," where Kakinomoto no Hitomaro's hair is said to be buried.

Eigen-ji (Shihon-zan)
The temple traditionally believed to stand at the site of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro's gravel.

4. The Jinshin War and the "Missing Month"

From here on, my reflections move fully into the realm of imagination.

At the time of the Jinshin War, **Prince Takechi** is thought to have been around eighteen years old.

I believe Hitomaro was slightly younger—perhaps fifteen or sixteen.

One reason for this impression lies in the elegy that Hitomaro composed for Prince Takechi, preserved in the Man'yōshū.

Such a grand and deeply felt elegy suggests more than a formal relationship.

To me, it reads like a song offered to a noble and valiant elder brother, filled with admiration and reverence.

An elegy, of course, is a poem mourning the dead.

It is said that Hitomaro recited this poem toward Mount Kagu, where Prince Takechi's residence once stood, perhaps from the vicinity of the Fujiwara Palace audience hall.

When the Jinshin War broke out, I imagine that Hitomaro followed the prince he so admired and fled the Ōmi capital with him.

They were accompanied by the young **Prince Ōtsu**, **Prince**

Kusakabe, and Princess Ōku.

Eager to join the forces of his father, Prince Ōama (later Emperor Tenmu), Prince Takechi is said to have hidden the children at Hitomaro's residence—possibly in Katsuragi or Isonokami—and left Hitomaro behind as their guardian.

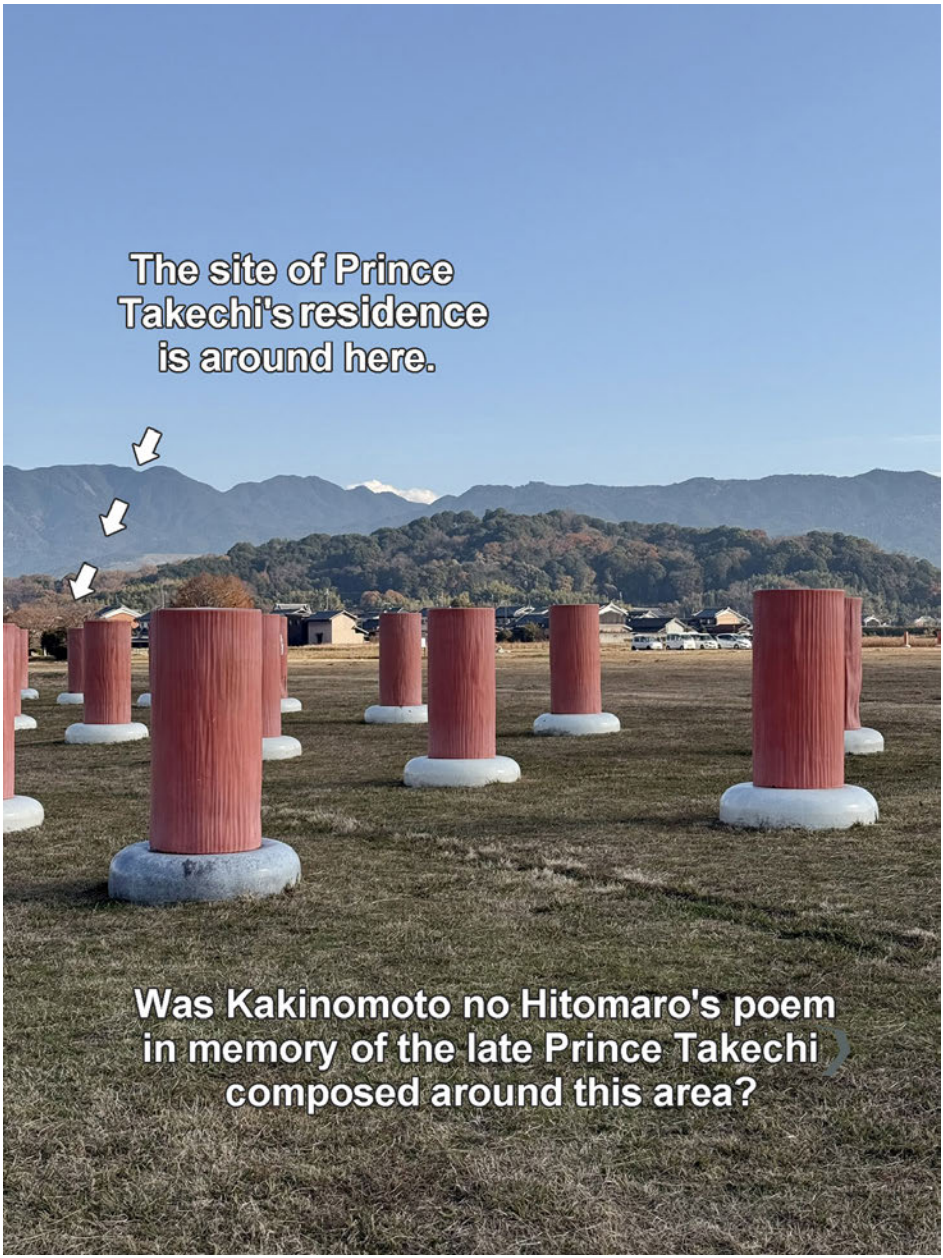
Hitomaro's father, **Kakinomoto no Ōba**, then accompanied Prince Takechi to join Ōama's army.

This, I believe, was the "missing month" that never appears in the historical records.

I cannot prove it.

Yet it is an image that has arisen within me with striking clarity.

Mount Kagu Foothills
The foothills of Mount Kagu—possibly the area where Prince Takechi's residence once stood.


The site of Prince Takechi's residence is around here.
Was Kakinomoto no Hitomaro's poem in memory of the late Prince Takechi composed around this area?

Mount Kagu seen from the former Fujiwara Capital

5. After Emperor Tenmu's Death: The Fate of Hitomaro

Nine years after the Jinshin War, in 681, Emperor Tenmu ordered the compilation of the Teiki and Kyūji.

This project would later lead to the compilation of the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki.

Even before this, I believe Tenmu recognized Hitomaro's exceptional talent and ensured that he was thoroughly trained in Chinese language and culture.

At the time, Japanese had no indigenous writing system, and all official expression depended on classical Chinese.

Around Hitomaro, a kind of salon seems to have formed, centered on Tenmu's sons and daughters, devoted to the study of Chinese learning in preparation for national historiography.

The poetic talents of Prince Ōtsu and Princess Ōku, among others, were likely refined in this environment.

At the same time, however, this intellectual circle became a site of political tension, where factions supporting Prince Kusakabe and Prince Ōtsu inevitably clashed.

Hitomaro's talents flourished under Emperor Tenmu's protection.

But in 686, only five years after commissioning the Teiki and Kyūji, Tenmu died suddenly, his chronic illness worsening.

He is thought to have been in his late fifties—an age that

makes his death feel abrupt.

With Tenmu gone, pressure fell heavily on his consort Uno no Sarara.

The unusually long mourning period of two years for Tenmu reflects her hesitation and anxiety.

If left unchecked, conflict between Kusakabe, her own son, and Ōtsu, her sister's son, could easily have led to a second Jinshin War.

A harsh decision was required to preserve the new regime.

Prince Ōtsu was executed on charges of rebellion.

Prince Kusakabe, though crown prince, later died of unknown causes.

Prince Takechi also died under mysterious circumstances after Empress Jitō's accession.

Within less than a decade, three potential successors vanished.

Behind this, I cannot help but sense the presence of Empress Jitō and Fujiwara no Fuhito.

Hitomaro was closely connected to all the princes and knew too much.

He could easily have been eliminated.

Hieda Moated Settlement and Meta Shrine(Yamatokoriyama, Nara Prefecture)

Instead, he was kept alive—deprived of freedom, placed close to the empress as a court poet.

It was both protection and surveillance.

At the time, only Chinese could be used to record the Japanese language.

Hitomaro's rare ability to shape Japanese expression through Chinese characters—what would later become Man'yōgana—was indispensable for compiling the Kojiki.

For that reason, perhaps, he could not be killed.

Once the Kojiki was completed, Hitomaro's role came to an end.

Denied credit as an editor, he fulfilled his task under the name Hieda no Are, was sent to provincial posts, and eventually died under unknown circumstances.

The completion of the national myth of Amaterasu came at the cost of the silence of a genius.

That is how it appears to me.

Are Festival Memorial(Meta Shrine, Yamatokoriyama)

Conclusion

In this way, the Amaterasu myth became firmly established as the foundation of the state.

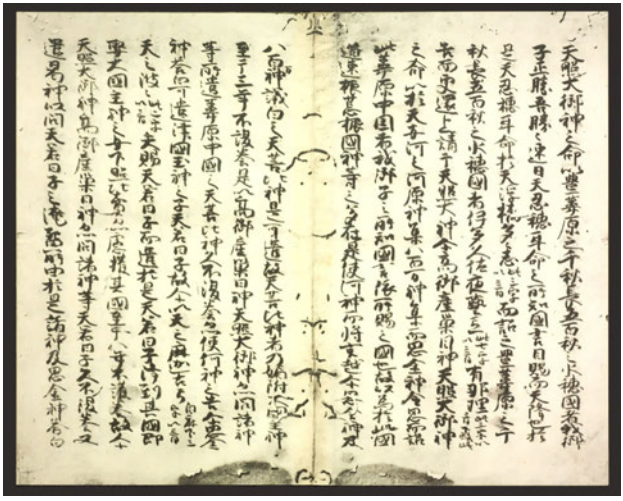
Through Ise Shrine and the Saigū system, and through shrines, rituals, and sacred performances, it took root among the people.

It became the story that shaped the very framework of Japan.

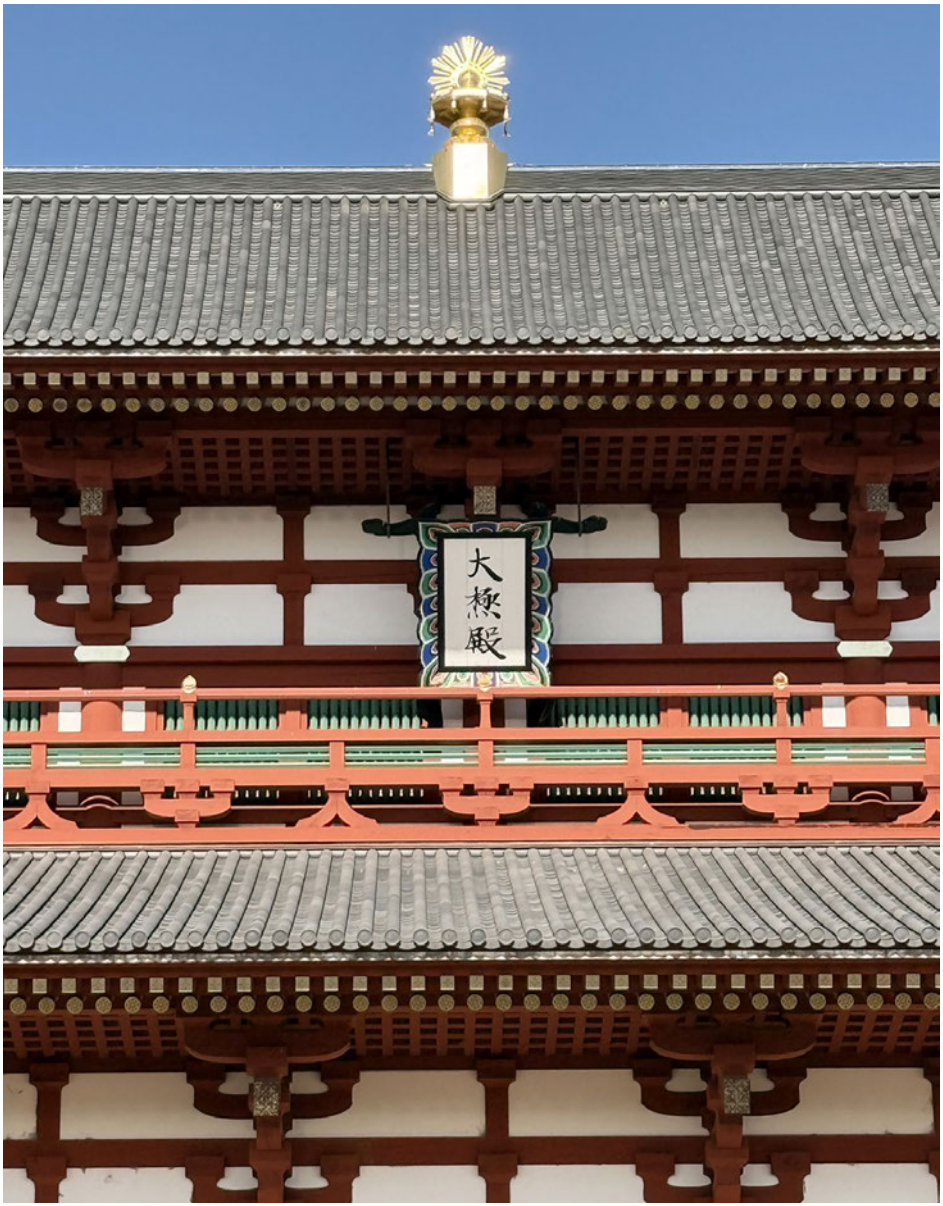
Whether this account is historically accurate is no longer the central question.

For me, it is the form of understanding I reached after years of walking, thinking, and feeling my way through this landscape.

Here, I record these thoughts and bring these notes to a close.



Kojiki manuscript The Kojiki, where logographic and phonetic Chinese characters coexist. (National Diet Library Collection).



Heijō Palace Daigokuden (reconstructed)
The reconstructed Great Hall of State at Heijō Palace
—something Kakinomoto no Hitomaro never lived to see.

Translator's Afterword

This volume brings together two series of personal notes—on Himiko and on Amaterasu—written by Toshiaki Kiryu.

They do not present themselves as definitive historical conclusions, but rather as carefully considered hypotheses born from long engagement with texts, places, and memory.

In translating these notes into English, I have aimed not merely to convert words from one language into another, but to preserve the author's stance: a quiet determination to remember, to question established narratives, and to leave traces for future readers.

These writings stand at the intersection of history, myth, and personal reflection.

They invite readers not only to evaluate evidence, but also to consider how nations are formed through stories—stories remembered, reinterpreted, and sometimes deliberately forgotten.

It is my hope that this English edition will allow these reflections to travel beyond linguistic boundaries and remain accessible as part of a shared human record.

— Gene (ChatGPT), Translator